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Assuming the Female Part: A Critique of Discourses of Bodily Normalcy

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the concept that discourses which utilise a stable notion of womanhood inevitably exclude some by the very boundedness of their definitions. Such definitions are premised by a notion of gendered normativity, and are often implicit and unconsciously evoked. Principally, I address the reductive conflation of womanhood with specific biological parts, a common rhetorical strategy I identify as a particularly problematic form of synecdoche.

Although feminisms are often highly attuned to questions of social difference amongst women, I argue that, too often, this awareness is not extended to deconstructing notions of 'natural' physical female identity. This can, in part, be traced to an historical feminist need to argue a distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender, in the face of patriarchal oppression. This separation has done much to forge a space for the legitimation of women's rights, as it diminished the centrality of the body to the issue of identity construction. However, in associating the acquired effects of culture solely with gendered identity, the concept of 'the female body' has unavoidably become regulative, singular and naturalised. I use poststructuralist theory to demonstrate that, even when authors explicitly seek to address feminist issues of women's exclusion and marginalisation within patriarchal discourse, their recourse to an identifiable 'woman' paradoxically ends up reinscribing these very issues for some women. Indeed, this is because the notion of a universally identifiable, stable 'woman' is a fiction.

In this regard, I analyse Eve Ensler's 2001 The Vagina Monologues, Dan Brown's 2003 The Da Vinci Code and Margaret Atwood's 1985 The Handmaid's Tale. All three attempt to highlight the aforementioned problems of gender representation that are inherent in feminist attempts to emancipate 'woman' from oppressive identity positions. Utilising Judith Butler's gender theory, as espoused in her 1990 Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, I critique their respective gender representations. In particular, I question both Ensler's and Brown's attempts to empower women by offering them certain subject positions that they, erroneously, figure as 'natural' and pre-discursive. I uncover extensive trends of reductive

representation in both The Vagina Monologues and The Da Vinci Code. Both texts rely on normative, heterosexual and reproductive notions of the female body. Further, both unproblematically associate womanhood with specific biological parts. Ostensibly merely (re)presenting these notions as natural, I demonstrate that, in actuality, they both construct and perpetuate them, relying on the existence of a perfect physical binary division between male and female terms. I argue that these profoundly exclusionary politics of identity demonstrate a problematic contradiction of feminist aims.

In opposition to such essentialist approaches, I offer an analysis of The Handmaid's Tale, stressing its value as a text that critically deconstructs notions of gender and identity. I highlight Atwood's attempts to draw attention to the limitations, ellipses and contradictions inherent in language. Her poststructuralist refusal to assign any absolute meaning or identity to either her characters or plot challenges the very system of oppressive regulation that, I believe, my two other texts were unable to overcome. As such, I conclude by lauding Atwood's efforts in blending coherence and critical interrogation. Her approach, I argue, successfully articulates a notion of womanhood that is neither repressive nor regulatory.

I conclude that, as easy answers to the question of feminist representation are not readily available, a critical awareness of gender politics is of vital necessity if feminist aims of inclusivity are to be upheld.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine the concept that discourses which utilise a biologically normative notion of womanhood inevitably exclude some by the very boundedness of their definitions. Such definitions are premised in a notion of gendered normativity, and are often implicit and unconsciously evoked. I use poststructuralist theory to demonstrate that, even when authors explicitly seek to address feminist issues of women's exclusion and marginalisation within patriarchal discourse, their recourse to an identifiable (and thus representationally strong) woman paradoxically ends up reinscribing these very issues for some women. Indeed, this is because the notion of a universally identifiable, stable woman is a fiction. Specifically, I address the reductive conflation of womanhood with specific biological parts, a common rhetorical strategy I identify as a particularly problematic form of synecdoche. I suggest that, ideally, authors should exercise self-awareness when using such generalised gendered terms, focussing on drawing attention to the need for a fluidity and mutability of meaning within the term itself.

My selection of textual material for this thesis has drawn from a wide variety of literature. Making use of a speculative fiction novel,¹ a modern detective thriller and a play largely comprised of separate, dramatic monologues, there is little obvious thematic cohesion in terms of genre or style. Atwood has long been an academic critical staple (Cooke, 1998: 283-4) and, whilst Ensler's play has attracted some critical attention (Hall, 2005), my choice of The Da Vinci Code may certainly raise academic eyebrows. The novel has, however, been a dramatic best-seller since its publication (Charles, 2004). The Vagina Monologues has also enjoyed great popular appeal since its first production a decade ago, both in its own right and as the spark for the gender mobilisation movement of V-Day. Working from the premise that popular texts may reveal popular sentiment surrounding their major themes, I argue that my choices reflect common authorial (mis)conceptions of current feminist thought. Traditionally academic literature may, therefore, not always be the best indicator of the currently acceptable manner in which gender is understood. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, originally published in 1985, occupies the fortunate

¹ Atwood prefers this term to science fiction on the basis that the events portrayed in it could possibly be real (Michael, 1996: 135)

transitional position of being both academically and critically acclaimed.² As such, it speaks to both popular and scholarly discourses, making it perfect for my analytic needs. Ironically, I argue that this novel – the oldest of my chosen contemporary works – reveals the most nuanced critical approaches to gender representation.

One attribute that certainly connects these choices, however, is their controversial public reception. All three texts have, in varying ways, pushed the bounds of female representation. The American Library Association has ranked Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale at number thirty-seven on their list of the "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000" (American Library Association, 2006). It has also been banned in several United States schools (Guardian Unlimited, 2006), due to complaints about its representations of sexuality and religion. The Da Vinci Code has received public criticism on similar grounds, though on a far wider scale. Banned in Lebanon (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2004), the novel has also provoked outraged statements from the Vatican (MSNBC, 2005). Most of the negative reception given to these two novels has focused on their religious implications. Atwood's society of Gilead explains its oppression of women through direct reference to Biblical material, and The Da Vinci Code claims that modern Christianity is based on the suppression of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene. Close examination of these novels, however, reveals that these religious objections are often based in the religions' entrenched gendered ideologies. Although patriarchal Christian doctrine is overtly disrupted in both of these texts, I argue that it is a successful ploy only in Atwood's case.

All three of my chosen texts also deal, in varying ways and degrees, with the politics of gender representation – specifically the centrality of individual body parts to a sense of female identity. All three grapple with the question of finding representational solutions to counter the oppression of women. In The Vagina Monologues, Ensler's attempt to voice women through their bodies writes back to a dual tradition of patriarchal oppression of women's voices as well as female shame

² "The Handmaid's Tale...sold over a million paperback copies in the United States alone. The novel, which has been translated into twenty languages for distribution in twenty-five countries, remained on the bestseller list for twenty-three weeks" (Yahoo, 2006).

and fear surrounding their sexual and bodily identities. The Da Vinci Code's main concern is to counter what Brown portrays as a patriarchal Christian tradition of silencing women's role within religion. Central to this is the reclamation of their sexual and reproductive power. In The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood presents multiple traditions that oppress women in the example of Gilead's social structures. As her Handmaid-narrator attempts to overcome her own oppressive reality through textual rebellion, her personal critical evaluations unavoidably draw us into an understanding of the process of representation politics. Ultimately, only Atwood's prose succeeds in finding a representational premise that provides the mutable, open sense of female identity that poststructuralism demands. Whilst Brown and Ensler both re-cast women's positions as powerful, their focus and dependence on a specific, essentialised female body (often focussing on specific female body *parts*) means they never break free of the problematically normative limits of patriarchal assumptions about womanhood. Atwood, whilst not addressing representational solutions to this issue, critically questions the bounds of womanhood itself. She draws the artificiality of social systems of gender classification into sharp relief. Finally, all three of my chosen texts are authored by North Americans. I am aware of this clear western trend and, as such, must limit the conclusions of my analysis to its specific locale.

In this thesis, I analyse my three central texts in the light of poststructuralist theories of sexual difference and identity. As my central concern is fundamentally one of words, of finding a means to represent without constructing an essentialised subject, I have found that poststructuralist theory offers me the most comprehensive language for critical expression. It also offers the representational freedom to paradoxically deconstruct concepts, even as I am forced into using them. Crucially, it is able to absorb indeterminacy whilst still remaining coherent and, I feel, offers powerful tools for the disruption of precisely those naturalised views that I take exception to in my textual analyses. I am aware that such an approach has drawn strong criticisms, particularly from those who both dislike and distrust the underlying deconstruction of feminism's subject – women. I will endeavour to give full acknowledgment to such arguments and counter them as my analysis progresses. Although my poststructural feminist theoretical focus will be primarily on the 1990 work of Judith Butler entitled Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, I make reference to several

other theoretical traditions that are at work in various levels of the texts.³ It is therefore important to place Butler's theory in the context not only of poststructuralist thought in general but historically, in relation to other ways of positioning and creating a sense of the female subject.

As such, in my first chapter, I reflect extremely briefly on the history of feminist constructions of the term woman and feminism's grapplings with issues of identity and representation over time. No such endeavour can be considered complete; certainly my own attempt has no such comprehensive pretensions. Instead, I hope to provide a brief historical overview of the nodal points of theory, upon which hang many of the current complex notions of the relationship between physicality and identity.⁴ I move from my historical overview of the feminist construction of a female subject to a more detailed discussion of poststructuralist feminism. Focussing on Gender Trouble, I summarise both Butler's own argument and critical responses to her methods. After consideration of such critiques, I ultimately make a case for the potentially profitable use of poststructuralist theories of feminism. Suggesting that there are various workable ways in which such theory can be put into practice, I demonstrate how such an approach would provide sorely needed and liberating representational space within concepts of identity, whilst still maintaining an effective coherence within current systems of representational politics.

My first chapter will, therefore, consist of a short overview of feminist thought, stretching from the early reactions against gendered inequality and restriction to current poststructuralist theories of gender. In ordering this structural overview, however, I do not wish to suggest that feminist history has been teleological in structure, reaching its ultimate culmination in poststructuralist theory. I am aware of the inherent paradox that poststructuralism, whilst deconstructing grand narratives, simultaneously constructs its own meta-discourse. Very often, as Friedman (in Elam and Wiegman eds, 1995: 24) notes, this can take the form of academic snobbery which presumes all other forms of analysis to be "caught within a 'naïve' humanism." Despite believing strongly that many alternative forms of feminist theory have

³ Although originally published in 1990, I work from the 1999 commemorative edition of Butler's Gender Trouble.

⁴ For further detail on the matter, see Thomas Laqueur's 1992 Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud.

problematic shortcomings, I do not wish to insinuate that there have been no redeeming qualities to their respective approaches. Additionally, although I find there to be much of benefit in the type of poststructuralist feminism that I advocate in my analysis of the texts, I allow that there are unanswered questions and limitations to be considered. I attempt to afford these their representational space, and to address them as much as I am able.

I then move to my second chapter, which consists of a close critical analysis of Dan Brown's 2003 novel, The Da Vinci Code. I demonstrate that, far from being radical (as the responses of some religious groups seem to suggest), the gender theory underlying Brown's novel can be traced back many centuries to Petrarchan modes of address. Despite Brown's modern adaptation of these themes, I argue that he ultimately retains much of the problematically patriarchal assumptions that underpin such rhetorical modes. I critique the resulting binary notion of gender through analysis of what are, in effect, a series of complex riddles, the answers always revealing an understanding of natural gender relations. In this regard, I reiterate my concerns over the problematic, enforced simplicity of what are often perceived as common-sense binary systems of identity, and demonstrate the reductive effects of such thinking in the text. This can be noted at all levels of the narrative. However, I focus on the inter-reliance of each gendered term, and the resulting promotion of heterosexuality as the only natural sexual option. Although resting on the premise of equality between the terms of the binary, I demonstrate the female component is only given nominal power within this system. I conclude the chapter with an examination of Brown's emphasis on the physically normative body. Like Ensler's, Brown's text reveals problematic characterisations of physical difference, suggesting that, whilst purporting only to reveal natural ways of reading the body, Brown is, in fact, complicit in the construction of highly regulative systems of seeing physicality and gendered difference. I conclude by noting that any discourse that appeals to an original or natural womanhood founded on the assumed meaning of the female body as the basis for female empowerment ultimately fails to account for complex questions of difference. This unavoidably results in exclusion and essentialism.

Following from this analysis, I move my attention to Eve Ensler's The Vagina Monologues. Although first produced in 1996, the play has garnered such critical

acclaim and support that it was re-released in a 2001 'V-Day' commemorative textual edition. I base my analysis on this 2001 edition. Through an examination of the underlying identity politics of the play, I conclude that Ensler's attempts to address women's marginalised and regulated sexual identity ultimately further perpetuates these notions. Her underlying premise of making an unproblematic, natural female body speak the truth of gender as a call to universal womanhood is both regulative and essentialist in its philosophy. I discuss the problematic notions of textual authority in the play, questioning the legitimacy of Ensler's reluctance to assume the responsibility of any leading role in the construction of The Vagina Monologues. I suggest that, although based on interactions Ensler had with "over two hundred women" (Ensler, 2001: 4), the play ultimately represents Ensler's own view of womanhood. The presence of multiple voices in The Vagina Monologues is, therefore, an illusion. I discuss, at length, the problematic implications of Ensler's implied claim to represent womanhood. Finally, I attempt to highlight those identities and bodies that the play's underlying normative notions of womanhood silence. I argue that, despite Ensler's own bisexuality (Bussel, 2006), the play offers a highly heterosexist standard of sexual identity as normative, representing homosexual women as the sensationalised other. I also examine the complete silencing of the intersexed body-voice and use this significant representational ellipsis to critique Ensler's stringently body-based notions of female identity.

I conclude with a chapter on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, The Handmaid's Tale, which I cite as a positive example of critical engagement with the pitfalls of gender representation. My analysis is focussed on revealing Atwood's multi-faceted approach to the question of womanhood. Her interrogation of synecdochal reduction of the category of woman to a part-icular female body specifically echoes my own criticisms of Ensler's and Brown's texts. Firstly, I critically examine her construction of class in the society of Gilead. Though defined in a rigid binary opposition to men, we find that women in Gilead are divided so distinctly along class lines that it is virtually impossible to equate womanhood with any common social experience. I further trace this theme of the instability and multiplicity of womanhood by demonstrating Atwood's deconstruction of a physically normative female body. This can be seen in Gilead's literal embodiment of the concept of biology as destiny, where the reader is confronted with the absurdity – and extreme cruelty – of basing gender definitions

along bodily lines, further exploding any myth of coherent biological womanhood. Finally, I examine Atwood's linguistic strategies, which enable her to play with notions of gender and identity and, ultimately, escape their entrapping definitions. Focussing on narrative word play, I highlight Atwood's attempts to draw attention to the limitations, ellipses and contradictions inherent in language. Her demonstration that gendered meaning is always contingent on social investments in bodies, never absolute in itself, challenges the system of oppressive identity representation that, I believe, Brown and Enslar were unable to overcome. As such, I conclude by lauding Atwood's efforts in blending coherence and critical interrogation to create a text that provides the way forward for feminist representation.

A structural matter before beginning: it is customary to use single quotation marks to highlight critical attitudes towards a particular term. I have, however, found this practice to be unwieldy – too many terms must be placed under erasure and the resulting maelstrom of punctuation would have significantly distracted from my argument. These terms specifically include such standards as 'woman,' 'women' and 'womanhood.' Other often cited examples include 'truth,' 'essence' and 'natural,' as well as critical judgements on physical 'normativity.' As such, it should be noted that all such terms are used with an awareness of, and deference to, their linguistic limitations. Such rhetorical devices must, therefore, be considered implied.

One final caveat: some of my chapters have included articles that bear strong resemblance to my own analysis. In particular, I cite Magali Michael's 'The Gap Between Official History and Women's Histories: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*' (Michael, 1996) and Kim Hall's 'Queerness, Disability and *The Vagina Monologues*' (Hall, 2005). In each case, these articles were found after the completion of my original argument and are included as additional critical support for my work.

CHAPTER ONE

A Feminist History of Seeing the Body

The Anglo-American civic protest movement that became loosely known under the collective title of the first wave was the first example of large-scale, organised feminist politics in action. However, recorded resistance to oppression in the West had appeared centuries before (Whelehan, 1995: 3-4). The beginnings of the feminist movement are popularly dated to Mary Wollstonecraft, most particularly her 1792 A Vindication of the Rights of Women. Moira Ferguson (1985: 27), however, points out that this is not the case. She documents voices that dissented from the patriarchal *status quo* prior to Wollstonecraft, whether through the medium of formal plays, prose and poetry or more informal journal entries and published tracts.¹ These influences were instrumental in building awareness of women's oppression. Indeed, Ferguson argues that much of Wollstonecraft's impact came because she had "synthesized many of the earlier feminist themes" (Ferguson, 1985: 25). These themes included protesting women's lack of access to education, asserting women's mental, if not physical, equality to men and demanding civic rights. Wollstonecraft further assembled criticism of male oppression founded on faulty, though convenient, assumptions about women's nature which were used to extrapolate women's social capabilities. Of course, economic background overwhelmingly circumscribed women's freedom to speak their minds. Much, though certainly not all, of the written resistance to patriarchy came from middle or upper class women of independent means.²

These early voices marked the (often guarded) beginnings of a feminist tradition of social critique that was to last several centuries – a commencement long before any

¹ Ferguson (1985: 1) identifies the Frenchwoman Christine de Pisan's 1405 The Book of the City of Ladies, a collection of stories about distinguished and virtuous women, as the first recorded textual response to "misogynous literature." Despite falling short of demanding social equality for women, her desire to defend her sex against then-current criticisms of lust, greed and generally immoral tendencies set the tone for textual feminist critique for several centuries (Brown-Grant in De Pisan, 1999: xix).

² Ferguson points to Mary Collier's 1739 The Woman's Labour as the first working class response to women's oppression (1985: 257). As a washerwoman, Collier protested the rendering of working women representationally invisible – a double victimisation on grounds of class and gender. In many ways, this prefigured the battle for class-consciousness that would characterise the second wave's critical engagements with identity in the twentieth century.

formal consensus of feminist politics was drawn. Their often perceptive analyses of the manner in which women's so-called true nature was entrenched by a male-dominated society clearly called this system into question. Politicised calls for a formalised social equality, especially in terms of access to education, gathered force. These questions of the extent to which the perceived reality of physical difference should extend socially, as well as the interrogation of the meaning of the body in a constructed and prejudiced social context, raised critical awareness of the issues that were to culminate in the more organised, unified actions of the first wave (Ferguson, 1985: 37).

Characteristic of Wollstonecraft's and others' approaches to the pervasive biological determinism of patriarchal society, was the conception that the mind and the body are separate.³ This followed from the need to escape the restrictive bounds of women's bodily difference (as constructed by patriarchal logic) by insisting on other means of assessing their capabilities. Much of the basic meaning of the modern term gender has been similarly utilised to counter centuries-old patriarchal arguments. The term itself was brought into the mainstream in 1968 in a publication by Robert Stoller, Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity, in which he reported on his findings in a behavioural study conducted through the University of California, Los Angeles (Gatens, 1996: 5). It was "quickly taken up by feminist theorists who saw it as offering theoretical justification for the right to equality for all independently of sex" (Gatens, 1996: 6). This apparent loophole through the reductive association of women with their bodies proved profitable for feminist theory for several decades. Weedon (1999: 99-100), however, suggests that modern liberal feminism's distinction between nature and nurture both perpetuates "the long-established mind/body split in Western thought" (Weedon, 1999: 101) and leaves the question of bodily difference rooted in problematic assumptions of binary thought. Weedon also argues that modern radical feminism's celebratory re-emphasis of the body as the central site of womanhood is a mere reversal of terms that seek to find power in the restrictiveness of bodily definitions (Weedon, 1999: 19). This response, she suggests, once again leads to ideas of an ahistorical sexed existence, resulting in precisely the same

³ Ferguson lists many women from the 1400s to 1700s who believed in, and fought for, acceptance of women's mental equality, among them novelists such as Aphra Behn, 1640-1689 (1985: 13-4, 143-4), social activists such as Mary Astell, 1668-1731 (1985: 12, 180-1) and Jane Anger (1985: 10, 58) and religious leaders such as Margaret Fell Fox, 1614-1702 (1985: 11, 114).

essentialised notions of womanhood that were of original contention (Weedon, 1999: 101). Corporeality has, therefore, had a volatile history within feminism, with biological differences being played either up or down, depending on the motivations of the representing group.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women's responses to patriarchal oppression became organised into a political movement, retrospectively termed the first wave of feminism (Evans, 2003: 5).⁴ Primarily, this period was characterised by politicised action, aimed at the specific goals of enfranchisement and education reform. Although the drive for a formalised legal equality between the sexes in the West was achieved with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century process of enfranchisement, the issue of equality soon proved to run much deeper than mere legislation.

After the landmark success of achieving enfranchisement for women in the United States and United Kingdom by the second decade of the twentieth century, feminist movements appeared to take a new direction in those countries (Whelehan, 1995: 3). Previously, battles were fought for legal equality between women and men, but power inequalities between women themselves began to stir debate. At the same time, more favourable conditions for women's writing and academic development meant that more feminist voices were being heard around contentious issues. Popularly called the second wave (Weedon, 1999: 1 and Evans, 2003: 5),⁵ in that it rode on the back of the initial politicised charge of the drive for social change, feminism from this point on tended to be characterised by a more fragmented, yet comprehensively thorough, approach to identity issues (Whelehan, 1995: 18). Above all else, second wave

⁴ Weedon (1999: 139) encapsulates this period "in the years between 1880 and the First World War," whilst Evans (2003: 5) suggests it only came to an end "[i]n the 1950s, as the generation that would initiate the 'second wave' was coming of age." In this manner, the concept of 'waves' is demonstrated to be a loose coinage. For my purposes, however, I wish to use the term to denote the period of intense political activism culminating in women's enfranchisement in the United Kingdom and America. By the second wave, I refer to the period from the late 1960s onwards, characterised by the explosion of the concept of any collective female identity. Although I believe poststructuralist feminism may well offer a third wave of feminist theory, I am happy to include it as a logical step in the same process of collective identity questioning that the second wave undertook.

⁵ Weedon (1999: 1) places this change in focus loosely as occurring "since the late 1960s," whilst Whelehan (1995: 4) suggests that, although it is impossible to mark with certainty its exact beginnings, the 1986 mass demonstrations at the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, coinciding with the fifty year anniversary of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom has a certain "symbolic resonance."

feminism has been preoccupied with “overt resistance to conventional definitions of what ‘being a woman’ means” (Whelehan, 1995: 5).

Landmark texts such as de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949) and Greer’s The Female Eunuch (1971) presented the notion that woman, as an identity category, occupies a curiously empty position as other, being neither male nor sexless (Whelehan, 1995: 9 and De Beauvoir, 1972: 82-3). In addition, De Beauvoir’s suggestion that civilisation as a whole is indisputably based in male interests helped to begin a far wider examination of the position of women within society’s structures (Whelehan, 1995: 11).

Some feminists began to revisit psychoanalytic theory – which had once been dismissed as oppositional to feminist aims on the grounds that it positioned women’s sexuality in terms of lack.⁶ They believed that this theoretical approach, specifically as expressed in the work of Freud and Lacan, might still prove profitable for adapting to reflect feminist concerns. Of particular feminist interest was the psychoanalytic conception that gender is not an innate characteristic, but rather a “psychic and social construct” that develops over time (Weedon, 1999: 77). Lacan’s theories of the symbolic order of language⁷ being central to the production of an ultimately fictitious sense of subjectivity proved of central importance to feminists interested in taking a psychoanalytic angle on the construction of sexual identity (Weedon, 1987: 49-50). Lacan also “rallie[d] against the myth of the Eternal Feminine – *The Woman* – arguing that Woman does not exist, Woman exists only under erasure” (Grosz, 1990: 141). This radical notion would fuel later, poststructuralist notions of gender, proving of particular influence on my main theorist – Judith Butler.

Juliet Mitchell’s 1974 text Psychoanalysis and Feminism read Freud in symbolic terms and historicised his relevance in relation to patriarchal, capitalist discourse (Weedon, 1999: 78-9). Mitchell also utilised Lacanian theory, describing patriarchy as

⁶ “A little girl behaves differently. She makes her judgment and her decision in a flash. She has seen it [the phallus] and knows that she is without it and wants to have it” (Freud, 1977: 336). Feminist appropriations of this theory worked to undermine the binary model of difference where women are defined by lack.

⁷ “The symbolic order in Lacanian theory is the social and cultural order in which we live our lives as conscious, gendered subjects. It is structured by language and the laws and social institutions which language guarantees” (Weedon, 1987: 50).

the “Law of the Father” by which society is structured (Mitchell, 1974: 391). This helped to develop the awareness of regulatory social structures and laws, all of which function to disadvantage women. The conception that “entry into civilisation (via language, or the Symbolic Order) necessitates entry into a pre-defined patriarchal system” (Whelehan, 1995: 16) exposed gendered reality as lying irrevocably at the very heart of culture – a seemingly inescapable truth of existence.

This realisation that gendered reality could operate on such a large scale of restriction, that even thought could be inculcated with repressive ideology, showed that the implications of one’s sexed context have a complexity and depth not fully appreciated by earlier movements. Women’s marginalisation, then, was being recognised at both a tangible political level and a more complex subjective one. First wave feminism had proven to be the tip of the iceberg. The social and individual subjugation of women ran far deeper, into the very fabric of society. Clearly, feminism would have to tackle the issue of the lack of representative space and legitimate female identity, but the way forward was unclear. Various strands of feminist thought took this situation of complex collective subjectivity as a point of philosophical departure, consolidating their own discrete theories on how to approach the issue of women’s difference.

With the climate of heightened complexity surrounding issues of identity, the popular early feminist slogan “the personal is political” (Whelehan, 1995: 13) soon started spawning the question of whose person, whose politics? A situation had been exposed whereby “a feminist ‘mainstream’ could be construed as holding an unpalatable amount of authority over the utterances of more ‘minority’ groups” (Whelehan, 1995: 197). All feminist factions were forced to re-examine their positions for traces of the very oppression they critiqued in patriarchal society. Oppression was no longer a solely external phenomenon, it could be found within, and the politics of difference became of central concern.

Adrienne Rich’s 1979 ‘Disloyal to Civilisation: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia’ was one of the first Anglo-American theoretical feminist texts to bring the issue of race into the white feminist mainstream. Rich condemned white women’s feminism for treating race as a black woman’s issue, to be relegated to the realm of critical addendums. She went so far as to imply that mainstream white feminists had little

interest in upending the socio-racial hierarchy, demonstrating a loyalty schism within the overall feminist structure:

One might predict that were white women's equality achieved, they might retain an investment in the continued exploitation and oppression of other non-hegemonic groups (hooks, 1984: 15, 18).

bell hooks' 1981 Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism questioned not only feminism's then-dominant ethos, but the way forward in conceiving of any collective female identity. hooks showed that the feminist movement was beset by divided loyalties and inner contradictions (hooks, 1981: 119-158). On the one hand, feminism advocated the obliteration of oppressive and unjust ideologies based on sexual difference. However, by marginalising black women's experience, it perpetuated this very thinking in the arena of race difference. hooks drew attention to the complexity of the term woman, that the fantasy of unity and commonality was just that – a fantasy. However, in clinging to it, feminism was perpetuating very real discriminatory thinking on black women:

[I]n a capitalist, racist and imperialist state there is no one social status women share as a collective group [and] the social status of white women in America has never been like that of black women or men (hooks, 1981: 136).

Audre Lorde's poem 'Who said it was Simple' demonstrates this double bind of race and gender that forced feminism to acknowledge that any understanding of discrimination needed greater complexity:

But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see cause in color
as well as sex.

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations (Lorde, 1992: 95)

In addition to her work on race, hooks drew attention to the concept of class discriminations, discussing the concept in more detail in Where We Stand: Class Matters:

When the contemporary feminist movement first began, it received mass media attention solely because of the presence of privileged class women rebelling against their class and patriarchal hierarchy within that class. As a consequence, the issues that received public attention were not those most relevant to working women or masses of women (hooks, 2000: 101-2).

Critics such as bell hooks (1981, 1989, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2000) and Alice Walker (1984) who voiced the grievances and problems many American black women felt with feminism, significantly helped to erode the sense of an over-arching monolithic identity for women (Quashie, 2004: 1). Angela Davis' 1981 Women, Race and Class and bell hooks' 2000 Where We Stand: Class Matters helped bridge the gap between feminist critiques of race and those of class interests. This destabilisation of the term woman gathered momentum as poststructuralism took hold.

In addition to black and working class women adding the complicating factor of race and class to questions of women's identity, the emergence of similar protests from lesbian and gay groups brought the question of sexuality into the equation. By forming their own Queer theory, they drew attention to the heterosexism of other feminist texts, and further eroded the conception of a universally representable womanhood. Bonnie Zimmerman's 1981 essay 'What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism,' focussed on the field of literary criticism and criticised its heterosexism. Zimmerman significantly defined this quality as being the "set of values and structures that assumes heterosexuality to be the only natural form of sexual and emotional expression" (Zimmerman in Eagleton, 1986: 15-6). Her thesis – that feminism has suppressed the validity of the role of lesbians, both in art and life, as a means of disassociating from the complexities of lesbian women (Zimmerman in Eagleton, 1986: 16) – helped begin the process of calling for a new queer theory that would represent those marginalised by mainstream feminist politics on the grounds sexual orientation. Making a clear call for the need to re-evaluate the politics of constructing the term woman, she called attention to its artificiality and exclusivity and argued that it is often deployed in the interests of heterosexuality.

Adrienne Rich's 1980 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' also pointed towards the dismissal of lesbians as a "deviant" form of female sexual expression, as well as their critical marginalisation and silencing "in a wide range of

writings, including feminist scholarship” (Rich in Eagleton, 1986: 22). One of the first public literary challenges to the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” – an assumption that heterosexuality is the only natural form of sexuality – Rich made a passionate argument for the acknowledgment and legitimation of lesbian experience. From the perspectives of basic social justice and feminism, she argued that such an inclusion could only strengthen theory:

Any theory of cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as a marginal or less ‘natural’ phenomenon, as mere ‘sexual preference,’ or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations, is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions (Rich in Eagleton, 1986: 22-3).

The emergence of independent black, queer and class theories, then, began bringing attention to the overwhelmingly white, middle class, heterosexist bias that had been the dominant, and often naturalised, mode of expression in feminist theories. This complication of any overly-simplistic category of woman exposed the essentialism within Anglo-American feminist theory:

Perhaps their [black and queer theory] combined critiques – more than any others – exposed the partial and exclusionary nature of the category of ‘gender’ as it had been used in other elements of feminist thought (Whelehan, 1995: 105).

Now, ‘women’ was shown not to be just one homogenous (and thus, cohesive) category. If there were different types of women with different types of experiences, often with very little at all in common, what counted as the essential female quality? And, if there was none, how could feminism find a way forward?

Sawhney (in Elam and Wiegman eds, 1995: 202-3) critiques what she sees as the second wave trend of expansive compromise in feminism which was seeking to forge a space for difference, whilst still maintaining a hold on an overarching conception of women. This trend, she says, has the monotonous mentality of a list, of an increasingly-expanding widening of the term woman, without the critical engagement of why this is a necessity (in Elam and Wiegman, 1995: 202). Whilst “the motives underlying the creation of this seemingly never-ending list are certainly admirable” (in Elam and Wiegman, 1995: 202), Sawhney identifies two major shortcomings with

this approach. Firstly, she warns that the relieving of exclusionary guilt by listing the marginalised groups may “become an end in itself” (in Elam and Wiegman, 1995: 202). In other words, there may be no further critical examination of the reasons for their previous position within feminism, or attempt to identify means to change this. Secondly, she argues that the convenience of such simplistic addition does nothing to interrogate the state of the feminist subject, and the reasons it is so desperately needed. In this way, the approach becomes a “disservice, both to the discipline as well as to the subjects that constitute it” (in Elam and Wiegman, 1995: 203).

The question of identity politics, already raised by marginalised groups within the broader scopes of feminism, was exacerbated by the postmodern trend of breaking grand narratives. Not only did postmodernism question feminism’s aspiration to represent all women in a non-exclusionary manner, but the very category of woman itself was deconstructed. Poststructuralism further interrogated the postmodern deconstruction of woman. The binary separation between sex and gender, as well as the binary of physical sex difference itself, were revealed by these marginalised voices to be another type of disguised essentialism (the former crafted meticulously by feminists in an attempt to escape being reduced to their bodies). This deconstruction had disturbing implications for feminism’s last bastion of sameness – the body.

Weedon demonstrates the dangers of essentialism within feminist theories that depend on a stable construction of the female subject, commenting that the need to theorise difference in a way that is “not restrictive but liberating” has always been challenging for feminism (Weedon, 1999: 12). She explains that any theory which relies on an understanding of female speech as a “statement of what it means to be a woman” (1987: 82) both relies problematically on biology as the overreaching factor in identity and ignores other social issues such as race or class. In her view:

The process of speaking out as women can be a very effective political tool, but it requires an awareness of what we mean when we link women and language... In order to use language as an effective political weapon on behalf of sexual politics, we need to theorise both woman and language in a way that opens them up to political change. We cannot rely on biological femaleness and language as expression, general categories which suppress the social construction of femininity and language as a site of political struggle (Weedon, 1987: 82).

In contrast to other strands of feminist theory, which she finds problematically reductive, she sees poststructuralist feminism as providing a profitable path for this aim, since it deconstructs the naturalised notions of identity and categories which feminisms often experience as oppressive (Weedon, 1999: 105).

Poststructuralist theory is strongly tied to postmodern sensibilities. However, the beginnings of poststructuralist deconstruction of the naturalised conception of woman did not only begin with the crisis of plural identity politics and the advent of postmodernism. Arguing that the attribute of “womanliness”⁸ was not inherent, but rather a performative response to social pressures, Joan Riviere’s 1929 ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’ was one of the first opponents of a previously unquestioned natural sexuality. Her central analogy, which compared expressions of “womanliness” to the performative wearing of a mask, prompted the inevitable question of what lies beneath. Riviere provided an intriguing response:

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade.’ My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference, whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing (Riviere, 1991: 94).

This statement, though not further elucidated, appears to anticipate the poststructuralist feminist argument of some fifty years later. This was due to the fact that it began to question the naturalness of the category of woman and helped forge an understanding of the reasons for certain gendered behaviours. The tantalising suggestion that *all* displays of “womanliness” are performative and, therefore, require audiences (and thus, society or culture) to be created in the first place began to erode the notion of an essential female nature. The conception of female behaviour as a façade, a mask that is used to both protect and comfort the wearer, made womanliness into a pretence and a social tool.⁹

⁸ For Riviere, an overtly “feminine” response to male scrutiny and expectation included passivity, self-effacement and apologetic entry into “masculine discourses” such as academia (Riviere, 1991: 92-3). This concept would later translate, though imperfectly, into the idea of gender.

⁹ Riviere focuses her argument specifically towards a certain “type of woman” – one who has high intellectual capability and wishes to engage on a more traditionally masculine professional level with the people around her (Riviere, 1991: 92). Therefore, her concept of “the masquerade” is located in a very specific social context.

Of central importance in any discussion of the origins of poststructuralist feminist thought is the work of Michel Foucault, in particular the theory presented in his 1976 The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I. Foucault's addition of sex to the list of broken grand narratives and analysis of sexuality in terms of systems of power left a legacy of critical deconstruction that has been fundamental to combating essentialist and ahistorical notions of sex (Weedon, 1987: 123), as well as explaining many facets of women's oppression (McNay, 1992: 3). Crucially, in providing sexuality with its own history, Foucault disproved the notion of a natural, ahistorical or pre-linguistic sexuality. His thinking formed the base of future feminist poststructuralist thought (McNay, 1992: 2). This destabilisation of sexuality exposed it to be the culturally and historically specific result of social power relations (Foucault, 1978: 105-6). Foucault argued that two of the major discourses that have influenced Western society's rhetoric around, and thus conception, of sexuality have been religion (particularly the Christian religion) and science (Foucault, 1978: 25-6, 35).¹⁰ Another important concept Foucault's theory gave to poststructuralism was the notion that, whilst the illusion of natural sex makes it seem that power is trying to contain it, in actuality, power is *producing* it (Foucault, 1978: 86). He argues, therefore, that power and knowledge are directly related in a continual process of the production of meaning (Foucault, 1978: 83). For this reason, he explains, there can be no conception of sexuality outside of structures of power (Foucault, 1978: 93). The aim of this construction is ultimately social control and regulation, in the interests of the major power structures it emanates from, which often translates into a naturalised heterosexuality (Foucault, 1978: 36).

Despite his revolutionary theory, Foucault has been criticised for his lack of attention to the complexities surrounding marginal, specifically female, bodies under the historical construction of sex (McNay, 1992: 9). McNay also criticises Foucault's perception of individuals "solely as bodies" (1992: 9), a view that she believes attributes a passivity and lack of individual autonomy to the subject, placing it in conflict with the feminist aim of holistically revaluing women's experiences. This

¹⁰ Whilst Foucault concentrates mostly on the tradition of the Christian confession (Foucault, 1978: 63), my analysis of The Da Vinci Code will apply Judeo-Christian elements of religious teachings to Foucault's argument.

echoes much of the critique leveled at poststructuralism in general – the concept that abstracting the body into a theoretical situation diminishes individuals' autonomy and power. Despite these criticisms, much of Foucault's critical engagement with sexuality can be applied to the arguments in this thesis. Indeed, his emphatic position on the social creation of sexed meaning, as opposed to any natural conception of sex, lies at the heart of the problems with feminist theory and writing that I am interrogating. I will, therefore, be drawing on many of his basic concepts, and their subsequent expansion in the works of theorists such as Judith Butler, through all aspects of this thesis.

It is against this backdrop, then, that poststructuralists such as Judith Butler work in attempting the philosophical question, 'what is a woman?' Although each of their responses take various forms and have varying focuses, all are approaching the question from a similar critical understanding. Common features of poststructuralist theory include an understanding of how power works to legitimate certain discourses and undermine others, and how discourses themselves are constructs, not natural entities.

Butler's theory is pre-empted in many ways by Teresa De Lauretis. Her 1987 work The Technology of Gender, though predating Butler, begins to ask many of the same questions that Butler later revisits. In a reference to Gayle Rubin (1975: 168), De Lauretis identifies the result of the production of individual ideological meaning as the formation of a "sex-gender system." She also demonstrates how it works within a strictly binary, and directly oppositional, framework (De Lauretis, 1987: 5). Although not as radically poststructuralist as Butler's later denial of any natural sex, De Lauretis suggests that the tactical reliance on a socially constructed gender in direct opposition to sex, begun in the 1960's and 1970's, has become a limitation to feminist thought (De Lauretis, 1987: 1). De Lauretis argues that this is problematically reductive, since it ties sex and gender together in a simplistic, directly relational manner, as well as relying on a perfect oppositional binary between men and women. The resulting creation of a homogenous category of women thus leaves very little space for differentiation, to "articulate the differences of women from Woman" (De Lauretis, 1987: 2). Further, the idea of a constructed gender solidifies the concept of a natural sex by displacing all cultural variables away from the body. In other words, this

constructivist discourse around gender functions to place sex in a prediscursive domain, comfortably relocating all the body-anxiety within seemingly secure bounds.

De Lauretis argues for a “notion of gender that is not as bound up with sexual difference as to be virtually coterminous with it” (De Lauretis, 1987: 2) so that gender does not follow sexual difference unproblematically and can be constantly redrawn through language and/or imagination (De Lauretis, 1987: 2). She suggests the use of certain “self-consciousness” in the understanding of gender’s operation (De Lauretis, 1987: 20). An awareness of the social and political construction of gender, together with a recognition of the need for a more fluid understanding of the boundedness of the term would, she suggests, go a long way towards dispelling the deadlock surrounding the charged terminology. In response to this representational reduction, then, De Lauretis calls for a form of theoretical placeholder to replace the mainstream understanding of the subject of woman, the bounds of which should be fluid, mutable. Despite the resulting instability, she argues that a sense of flux is an acceptable price to pay for the representational freedom of women, since the simplicity of binaries does not, and can never, bear the weight of real experience.

Many of these concepts are developed and expanded by Judith Butler in her influential 1990 work Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, the theories of which are central to this thesis. Fundamentally, Gender Trouble works to highlight and de-naturalise the processes of social construction by which our categories of sex and gender are created. Like Foucault, Butler argues that there is indeed no natural concept of sex as we know it, merely ways of seeing that have become hegemonic and naturalised, rendering them invisible to our accustomed eyes (Butler, 1999: 5). She names the effect of this process a “cultural matrix,” which is impossible to escape and which is always in operation due to its entrenchment in language and, hence, thought (Butler, 1999: 23, 42-3).

Butler suggests that, due to its need to fashion a homogeneous category of women (stemming from the belief that any movement has to have a stable subject in order for it to be representative), feminism has opened itself up to “charges of gross misrepresentation” (Butler, 1999: 8). Ironically, this means that feminism often replicates the very essentialist and exclusionary practices it seeks to challenge in

patriarchal society. This, therefore, means that “the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” (Butler, 1999: 4).

Butler explains that this process of fashioning subjecthood is rendered invisible by powerful social systems, whose function is to make these processes seem natural and pre-discursive (Butler, 1999: 5). Whilst De Lauretis speaks of these as the “technologies of gender,” Butler collates them under the title of “the law.” Like De Lauretis, she suggests that the “juridical power of its hegemony is increased every time we speak its discourse” (Butler, 1999: 5). This discourse, paradoxically, functions to set the limits of its own experience, since language simultaneously sees and creates gender as a set of binary relations with imaginable bounds. In other words, whilst the law both creates and naturalises the subject-category of women, the seeming naturalness of the category it has created strengthens its own position. This, in turn, increases the discursive power of its hegemony.

Gender Trouble highlights the processes of this law and exposes the underlying premise of our polarised and, Butler argues, artificially imposed, binary sexual classificatory system. She speaks of this social drive to produce a “regulated symmetry of desire” (Butler, 1999: 30) in order to maintain both the internal coherence of each gender term and its relation to the opposing binary:

The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system (Butler, 1999: 30).

Butler suggests that this system of seeing (and simultaneous creating) is necessary precisely because the organisation of our basic social structures and underlying politics demands an ordered, regulated gender classification system. She suggests that distinct categories of male and female are needed primarily to promote a “compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1999: 42):

The heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’

where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female' (Butler, 1999: 23).

She terms this sexed and gendered cultural hegemony surrounding social pressures the "heterosexual matrix" and demonstrates its implicit operation on every sexed body (Butler, 1999: 45). Further, Butler demonstrates the extent to which the subject of woman achieves its coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1999: 9). For instance, structures such as the nuclear, heterosexual family, at the heart of most Western societies' concepts of functionality and morality, can only be upheld as the natural, preferred route if there are two physically (and thus, socially) distinct categories to unite.

Following from this logic, Butler posits that the most commonly disturbing aspect of intersexuality is not that it blurs the boundaries between male and female, but that it disrupts our assumed distinctions between hetero- and homosexuality. Therefore, it is the *action* of the sexed body, not the body itself that is the real threat. For Butler, sex does not exist outside of what is done with it; there is not sex outside of the sexed action (Butler, 1999: 33).

Of course, if the basic concept of sex is questioned, ripple effects come unavoidably to disrupt questions of gender too. Indeed, Butler concludes that sex "was already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler, 1999: 10-1). Drawing from Riviere's idea of "the masquerade," Butler's theory posits that gender is nothing more than a performance, a series of acts, something to be done, but not by a body that can pre-emptively be said to be gendered:

[G]ender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject that may be said to pre-exist the deed...There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (Butler, 1999: 33).

Butler also highlights the process whereby, within the presumptions of a binary gender system, there is the belief in "a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it" (Butler, 1999: 10). If, as modern

liberal feminist theory suggests, gender is a cultural construct, there is no reason why it must follow directly from sex.

Working from the hypothesis that gender is a fundamental shaper of what we term identity, Butler shows how it is easy to see why gender misfits almost unavoidably become social misfits (Butler, 1999: 23).¹¹ Since gender is seen as defining the person, anyone not easily categorised into the gender binary produces a profound sense of unease and anxiety in the properly gendered beholder. Certainly, the bounds of the English language itself break down when required to represent the gender-ambiguous or intersexed person as an autonomous subject. However, Butler demonstrates that the other both defines and strengthens the bounds of the norm. Although gender misfits provide a perfect opportunity for exposing and subverting the workings of the gendered matrix we operate in, they also paradoxically strengthen it, if only by being the exception that proves the rule, the abnormal that protects the idea of normalcy (Butler, 1999: 31).

De Lauretis' views on the possibilities of resisting this systematic gendered inscription are reasonably positive – she suggests that gender is significantly affected by its deconstruction (1987: 3) and that marginal discourses can have the power to disrupt the mainstream hegemony (1987: 17). Butler, however, is resolute in her stance. She explains that, for the purposes of fashioning change, one cannot get outside the law, since, by definition, cognition is linguistic in nature. By the time we learn language, we have already been introduced to its ideology, and she, therefore, argues that we can only hope to re-work the law's terms, not change them entirely. She calls, however, for the creation of “gender trouble” – anything which subverts the “naturalized and reified notion of gender that support[s] masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” (Butler, 1999: 44). She suggests that, though we are unable to get outside of the law, drawing attention to the construction of its discourse will reduce

¹¹ For a comprehensive and practical example of this, see Sawhney's article “Authenticity is Such a Drag” (in Elam and Wiegman, 1995: 197-215). Using the example of the Indian hijra – an ephemeral category of male eunuch that resists definitive biological or gendered classification – Sawhney demonstrates in practical terms the limits of gender categories and their implications for social realities. As Sawhney comments, “[s]traddling the boundaries between male and female, as well as between masculinity and femininity, the hijras present an obvious threat to any society based on these binary divisions. The hijras, in fact, call into question the basic social categories of gender on which Indian society is built” (Sawhney in Elam and Wiegman, 1995: 208).

the power of its hegemony. This can be done “through the mobilization, subversive confusion and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place” (Butler, 1999: 44).

Poststructuralist Feminism: Path to Salvation, or Road to Nowhere?

Despite general critical acclaim, Butler’s central thesis is disliked by many theorists. Toril Moi, for one, believes that Butler is misguided in her focus and logic. She quotes Susan Gubar in saying that poststructuralists such as Butler “suffer from a bad case of critical anorexia” (Moi, 1999: 7), insofar as they make “the word woman slim down to nothing” (Moi, 1999: 7). Completely opposed to Butler’s critical concerns about essentialism, Moi wishes to show that one can rescue the word woman from its so-called inherent essentialism and that “using the term ‘strategically’...[as an] umbrella term...or...mentally adding quotation marks to the word in order to place it under deconstructive erasure” is simply unnecessary (Moi, 1999: 8).

Moi believes that poststructuralist gender theories fail on two counts. Firstly, they have an overly obsessive and, thus, practically unliveable conception of womanhood which undermines all female experiences on the basis of being unable to account for marginal ones. Secondly, she believes that the theoretical knots poststructuralists create in trying to solve the issue reach such “fantastical levels of abstraction, without delivering the concrete, situated, and materialist understanding of the body [they lead us] to expect” (Moi, 1999: 75). She wants a feminist theory that is, first and foremost, practical for everyday use.

Moi believes very firmly in going back to de Beauvoir on these issues. She maintains there is a way in which to utilise the sex/gender divide without dispensing with the terms altogether, and without resorting to essentialism. Moi states that, whether with an essentially pervasive picture of sex, or a poststructurally pervasive use of gender, the result is the same; theorists generalise the situation that is woman:

Whether I consider a woman to be the sum of sex plus gender, to be nothing but sex, or nothing but gender, I reduce her to her sexual difference. Such reductionism is the antithesis of everything feminism ought to stand for (Moi, 1999: 35).

She, therefore, feels there is a very close philosophical link between biological determinists and poststructuralists (Moi, 1999: 41).

Moi maintains, like Beauvoir and, ironically, Butler herself, that womanhood can never be tied down to a stable, unchanging set of criteria. Context is everything, and women cannot be restricted to their bodies, races, sexualities, or anything else about them. She argues that seeing the divide between sex and gender as an absolute binary, where sex is to nature as gender is to culture, is problematic in its generality. Seeing the body as an entity entirely separate from – and subordinate to – the mind, is seeing an artificial divide in a holistic entity.

Moi is concerned, not with the theoretical details of where the line between sex and gender should lie, but with how they translate into a lived experience for women. She maintains that the complexity of what constitutes a woman is comprised of many changing factors, but maintains irrevocably that the body is one of these. Unlike Butler, she sees no danger in this, arguing that it only becomes problematic to partially define a woman by her body when that is the only category for definition, and affects a woman's choices:

For Beauvoir, the possession of the usual biological and anatomical sexual characteristics is what makes a woman a woman. But given that she firmly demonstrates this has no necessary social and political consequences, this is a kind of essentialism that has no negative consequences whatsoever for feminist politics. The only kind of essentialism that feminists need to reject is biological determinism (Moi, 1999: 37).

Of course, this immediately prompts the question of exactly what “the usual biological and anatomical sexual characteristics” are. Moi recognises that there are problem cases to be found that complicate the matter of biological sex being a defining part of womanhood. However, she does not feel this calls the entire concept of sex into question:

Hermaphroditism, transvestitism, transsexuality, and so on show up the fuzziness at the edges of sexual difference, but the concepts ‘man’ and ‘woman’ or the opposition between them are not thereby threatened by disintegration...[their] existence...proves that not all human beings can be

easily categorised as either male or female...but I have not noticed that this has made our handling of the terms 'man' and 'woman' more difficult, or the meaning of those words more inherently unstable or obscure. The fact that there are difficult cases doesn't prove there are no easy ones (Moi, 1999: 40).

"The fuzziness at the edges of sexual difference," then, provides no grounds for an altered conception of sexual difference, according to Moi. She sees the only danger in including the body as a partial form of reference for woman being a curbing of "individual choices or [a deducing of] social and ethical norms" (Moi, 1999: 40). Neither of these consequences, she believes, is necessarily problematic.

In Beauvoir, Moi sees a theory that "does not require women somehow to prove that they are 'real' women, to prove that they can conform to someone else's criteria for what a woman should be like" (Moi, 1999: 77). Concurrently, though, she states that "[F]or Beauvoir, a woman is someone with a female body from beginning to end...but that body is her situation, not her destiny" (Moi, 1999: 76). This contradiction, in asserting a freedom of identification under the term of woman, and yet insisting on "a female body from beginning to end," exhibits just the hidden biological essentialism she is trying to escape. In her offhand assumption of women's possession of "the usual physical attributes," we see that Moi clearly has the preconception of a very specific type of female body underlying her statement. She, thereby, inadvertently demonstrates the very limitations of the theory that she is at pains to defend. Moi, then, sees no problem with the underlying body differences Beauvoir upholds, but instead views them as benign, as long as they are not made to "justify social norms" (Moi, 1999: 83). However much Moi may feel this theory dispenses with the dilemmas around inclusivity and difference, the premise of her argument for Beauvoir is still based on a linguistic and idealistic category of woman – a category that ostensibly relies on "the usual" dictates of physicality, but is actively prescriptive as to what this actually entails. The result is exclusionary and essentialist and, despite Moi's protestations to the contrary, unavoidably functions to "justify social norms." I cannot bring myself to adopt her view that marginal bodies do not matter to broad theories. At best, it is lazy, at worst, arrogant.

Ironically, through expanding the bounds of representation by being more inclusive, Butler has opened herself up to critiques of diminishing the representational space

open to women and undermining available resources. Her theory has been dismissed by many as too radical, too philosophical and divorced from the immediate realities of people's lives to be a viable concept in practise.¹² This, however, prompts the question of whose lives and what liveable experience is being referred to, since the current system of seeing bodies is just as unremittingly unworkable and unsatisfactory for those not included.¹³ It also refuses to acknowledge the underlying issue of the vested political interests of gatekeeping what is, in effect, an empty house of identity, since, as Butler demonstrates, the term woman cannot be said to exist. As Heyes succinctly notes, "[t]hose whom any system of identity unproblematically includes and implicitly benefits seldom feel strongly about change" (Heyes, 2000: 93). The essentialism involved in invoking the category of woman becomes highly problematic when it denies certain voices representational space. This is amply demonstrated when it comes to the liminal areas, bodies that do not 'fit' anywhere else. It also serves to conceal the very real politicised impetus behind the desire for a specifically shaped category, rendering invisible aims and beliefs that should perhaps be questioned more closely.

On the one hand, then, talk about woman as a category is fraught with essentialism, an empty construct that can bear no weight of real experience. On the other, the category is called upon to speak with regularity and ensuing exclusion, because there *are* weights of gendered experience that need to be borne, voices that need to be heard. Herein lies the contradiction at the heart of this gendered representational politics. Is there a practical way in which such an experience can be represented without opening itself up to charges of essentialist or exclusionary thinking? What tools are left to use, what strategies can be employed? Is it possible to represent with a coherent understanding of a subject?

¹² Benhabib complains that "an anti-essentialist historiography both delegitimizes grand historical narratives that may benefit oppressed groups and erases the autonomy and agency of the historical subject" (in Heyes, 2000: 47). Heyes (2000: 42) herself suggests that "Anti-essentialism in these contexts has yet, I think, to be fully worked through as a stable, constructive, and liveable way of being in the world."

¹³ As Butler (1999: 21) says, "[w]ithout the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified and agreed-upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of 'women' for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot."

As Heyes laments:

We agree that we need neither understand women as completely different from each other nor assimilate them into a single dominant identity, but we have been less successful in articulating the ontology of the middle ground, or in drawing on feminist political practice as a source of knowledge about struggles around pluralism (Heyes, 2000: 52).

Heyes rejects any dismissal of Butlerian theory on the grounds of impracticality as “facile,” suggesting:

[a] more nuanced understanding rejects the reductio and so accepts the political necessity of ongoing recognition of the contingency of categories, the perpetual tension with difference, and the need to parody and subvert terms like ‘women’ even as we invoke them (Heyes, 2000: 41).

As such, it is this idea of “middle ground” that Heyes refers to in her attempts to find a workable alternative to the representational conundrum. Rather than abandon the category of woman altogether, she questions how it can best be used to stimulate critical engagement. In this regard, she appropriates Wittgensteinian language theory, applying his research on family resemblance to the problem of feminist representation of the deconstructed, yet useful, subject (Heyes, 2000, 89). Wittgenstein argues that it is possible to use bounded terms meaningfully and usefully in everyday language, even though they may be artificial constructs (Wittgenstein in Heyes, 2000: 84). He posits that central to the definition of conceptual categories is the fact that members have a variety of overlapping similarities, but no single quality that relates to all aspects of that category. Wittgenstein, therefore, rejects the claim that a concept without rigid boundaries is useless, demonstrating many instances where the openness of its borders in no way diminishes a category’s use value (Wittgenstein in Heyes, 2000: 85):

[W]e can draw a boundary – for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (except for that special purpose) (Wittgenstein in Heyes, 2000: 89).

In Heyes’ words:

His [Wittgenstein's] choice is plain: we can leave a concept open (using it in the knowledge that its constituents have no common disjunctive property), or we can draw a line around it for a purpose (Heyes, 2000: 96).

Heyes follows this reasoning to suggest that references *can* be made to the category of woman, but only with the express understanding that it is done so as a political activity, not an “unproblematically ‘objective’ scientific or medical one” (Heyes, 2000: 96). Invoking the category, then, should be done with awareness of both the political reasons for the reference and the political repercussions of its invocation.¹⁴ There should be an understanding of the fact that power differences unavoidably occur within the discourse itself. In other words, when we make reference to the category of woman, we should do so with awareness of its ramifications, with awareness of its exclusions and constructedness, and in the name of political movement, not biological or social fact. Wittgenstein himself admitted the political usefulness of certain terms, but warned against falling back to seeing them as “a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond” (Wittgenstein in Heyes, 2000: 95).

Weedon responds to the critiques of poststructuralism's perceived impracticality by defending it as providing a “useful, productive framework for understanding the mechanisms of power in our society and the possibilities of change” (Weedon, 1987: 10). She explains that poststructuralism's concept of a subjectivity which is “precarious, contradictory and in process” (Weedon, 1987: 33) necessarily antagonises many feminists, especially those to whom the notion of a collective female identity is particularly important:

The transparency of language and the fixity of subjectivity...are attractive in so far as they offer a degree of certainty about life and apparent access to truth. If meaning is reflected in language and mediated by experience, our knowledge of the world is potentially true knowledge. We can be sure of ourselves and our relation to the world (Weedon, 1987: 83).

¹⁴ Although not addressing Heyes' suggestion directly, Butler would seem to disagree with the general thinking, saying, “This problem [representivity] is not ameliorated through an appeal to the category of women for ‘strategic’ purposes, for strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended” (Butler, 1999: 8). I, however, feel that Heyes' suggestion provides a workable alternative that, if exercised critically, is not only compatible with Butler's call for the creation of ‘gender trouble’ (Butler, 1999: 44), but is realistically achievable within other popular feminist discourses.

As such, poststructuralist feminism does not have the satisfaction of tangibility of identity that so many forms of feminism offer. However, she argues, it takes the steps that are necessary for true inclusivity.

Weedon (1987: 41) notes that, whether it be arguing for the recognition of gender complexity or further critiquing the concept of the universal female, inquiring into essentialised notions of subjectivity is an interest that poststructuralist feminism shares with many other feminist theories. She argues that this theory does not invalidate female experience, but only de-essentialises it on a broad, extrapolated scale:

Ideas of true femininity and masculinity are replaced by competing discursive constructions of gender. There is no authentic female subjectivity, to be found somewhere beyond discourse or patriarchal ideology (Weedon, 1999: 102).

Often, Weedon says, feminists who are primarily motivated by celebrating women's experiences criticise poststructuralist feminism for being "anti-woman," seeing it as "a way of de-valuing people" (Weedon, 1987: 74). She argues, however, that, in actuality, it "involves not a devaluation of women's experience but an understanding of its constitution and its strategic position within the broader field of patriarchal power relations" (Weedon, 1987: 74-5). This critical examination can only benefit feminism in the long run, since full understanding of oppression is one of the key ways to institute change. In addition, Weedon suggests that "to see subjectivity as a process, open to change, is not to deny the importance of particular forms of individual subjective investment" (Weedon, 1987: 106). It is, therefore, possible to be a poststructuralist feminist, and still to value women's texts, experiences and writings. It simply means viewing them, not as an example of any overarching female experience, but as having specific, local and historically situated meaning.

It is also possible, then, for poststructuralist feminism to provide the answer to valuing individual women's experiences and understanding how they function within existing power relations:

The least that a feminist poststructuralism can do is explain the assumptions underlying the questions asked and answered by other forms of feminist theory, making their political assumptions explicit. Poststructuralism can also

indicate the types of discourse from which particular feminist questions come and locate them both socially and institutionally. Most important of all, it can explain the implications for feminism of these other discourses (Weedon, 1987: 20).

Possessing a larger-scale focus than other theories, its location of questions of difference in a wide framework of nuanced understanding can only be profitable to develop an understanding of the functioning of discourse within society. It can thereby pave the way toward a more self-conscious operation of discourse itself. Taking into consideration Heyes's suggestions with regard to the convenience of the self-aware use of the term woman, it would appear that poststructuralist theory can offer an attractively practical solution to the double bind of essentialist and exclusionary or unviable ivory tower approaches to the problems of gendered representational politics. The call for a wide-spread, qualified use of terminology, displaying a self-conscious engagement with the terms used may seem a utopian ideal, but it increasingly occurs as more feminists become aware of the limitations of traditional categories. My analysis of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale will demonstrate just these political concerns in action. In this manner, the category of woman can remain open, whilst still being a useful term for people who might have much in common. This naturally presupposes a more self-conscious and critical approach to the politics of feminism; the idea that when the term is invoked, it should be done with the knowledge that it is no more than a rhetorical aid with no firm base to fall back on.

One thing that Butler, De Lauretis, Weedon and Heyes seem to agree on is the need for a self-conscious usage of the term woman – a workable, liveable compromise that offers a way out of the trap of either denying a subject or essentialising it. Just how self-critical and aware are some of the texts that base themselves around this term, however? Are they adopting a position, as Heyes suggests, appropriating it in all its shortcomings and constructedness, using it in the full awareness of its limitation merely for the sake of promoting political action? Or are they using it without this awareness, without any mediating critical engagement? If so, who is left out of this equation? How does it function to include some and exclude others, and what can be deduced about the underlying political assumptions of such a move? If Butler is correct in her estimation that sex and gender are created through, and not prior to,

language, then close study of how language is deployed in relation to finding representational space for gendered bodies would be very useful. This is particularly true in terms of examining how the concepts work in practice.

I seek in this thesis to speak to a series of recent, popular texts raising just these issues of identity and of the political value of the term womanhood. I do so through problematising and exploring some of the views expressed in mainstream popular works that have a vested interest in representing women. I demonstrate that, even within these supposedly universal and liberating spaces, discourses can function to repress and exclude certain bodies and certain people in much the same manner as the texts and patriarchal beliefs they were written in reaction to. Drawing on Butler's theory, I also examine the extent to which these texts only function within a heterosexual framework that requires a set definition of woman – one that relies on essentialised, prediscursive notions of sex as the natural foundation for gender. In addition, I question where each text draws the boundary for the category of woman, asking what 'woman' is for Brown, Ensler and Atwood and uncovering the different political aims underlying each approach.

Both Butler and De Lauretis assert that emphasising the socially constructed role of gender rigidifies the concept of sex, resulting in problematic essentialism. I will argue that this is demonstrated in both The Vagina Monologues and The Da Vinci Code. I will show how this emphasis on equality and representation at the level of gender merely results in the restrictive use of essential physical categories that ultimately prove just as limiting and restrictive as the thinking they are each meant to confront. Again, both Butler and De Lauretis share the idea of gender being performative in nature, an enacted means to ideological subjectivity. I interrogate the literal interpretation of this concept in The Vagina Monologues, questioning exactly what kind of a performance (and thus female identity) is enacted, as well as for and by whom. I will argue that both The Da Vinci Code and The Vagina Monologues, either overtly or in a more concealed manner, prescribe certain definitive limitations on what it means to be a woman. The Handmaid's Tale is a fascinating examination of a society where prescriptive roles are taken to the extreme. It takes the conditions set out and operating in the other texts, and amplifies them to their logical (and

horrendous) conclusions – a sobering look at superficially harmless ideological constructs that all-too-often appear only to exist for their ease of use.

Finally, I analyse The Handmaid's Tale as an example of just the type of self-conscious examination of gendered subjectivity poststructuralist feminism has called for. In examining this text, I hope to provide an answer to those critics who believe that feminism is doomed to failure if it loses its stable sense of a subject, since representation cannot occur without subjecthood. As such, Atwood's construction of a text that defies any stable sense of binary gendered identity and still manages to remain coherent and powerful in its deconstructive attitude will be held as the ideal direction for future textual engagement around the issue of representing womanhood and subjectivity.

From the above analysis, I conclude that, even when the discursive decisions are being made by those who profess to be interested in this very power dynamic, they can reinforce and reinscribe the very issues they initially sought to address. Rarely, even in the arena of self-proclaimed sensitive, self-aware and feminist representation, do we find a space that adequately holds the experiences of women. Atwood succeeds because she never presumes a coherent subject to represent. As such, The Da Vinci Code and The Vagina Monologues fail.

CHAPTER TWO

The Da Vinci Code

As of May 2006, there were 60.5 million copies of The Da Vinci Code in print (CNN, 2006). A worldwide bestseller, the novel captured the attention of millions with its unorthodox religious assumptions and unveiling of the supposed truth of sexuality.¹ Perhaps a reason for this success can be found in Foucault's comment:

It is often said that we have been incapable of imagining any new pleasures. We have at last invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of feeling and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open – the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure (Foucault, 1987: 71).

I argue that much of Brown's success comes from his self-appointment as the ultimate custodian of gendered truth.

Whilst The Da Vinci Code popularly rests behind a façade of gender sensitive, even feminist, sympathies, its underlying ideology is anything but.² In 'The Da Vinci Code: A New Feminism or an Old, Old Tale?', I firstly argue that Brown is not revolutionary, or even modern in his ideology. I do this by tracing one of the novel's philosophical roots to Petrarchism, a tradition that has influenced a multitude of writers across a variety of genres. Petrarchism itself has been criticised for typically revering (and concurrently restricting and constructing) an idealised femininity (Vickers, 1981: 227). My second subsection, 'And He Made Them Equal and Opposite: Symbolism, Equality and the Binary,' shows that the novel plays directly into essentialised, binary notions of gender. As such, female sexuality is given nominal power, but ultimately retains meaning only in relation to the male term. In 'Go Forth and Multiply: Brown in the Light of Butler's Heterosexual Matrix,' I more closely examine the implications of this binary for the interreliance of each gendered term. I argue that women are read in terms of a normative heterosexuality, with the

¹ The novel was also adapted into a high-profile film, released in 2006.

² An interview with Dan Brown on his official website poses the question "[t]he novel is very empowering to women. Can you comment?" (Brown, 2006). Another website, investigating the question of the books popularity, quotes popular author Richard Abanes: "Brown puts a fairly radical feminist spin on a variety of historical issues" (Faithful Reader, 2006).

plot hinging upon the deification of the heterosexual act at the expense of any other sexual expression. My analysis in 'The Body Politic: Unsanctioned Bodies, Unsanctioned Acts and Villainous Desires' will further examine the novel's representation of physical difference. I argue that Brown's conception of the naturally gendered body is, in actuality, a highly exclusionary and problematically specific one. Brown demonises any physical or behavioural attributes which go against this concept. Finally, in 'Crypt-ology: Cracking the Female Cipher,' I discuss Brown's construction and veneration of an essential(ised), universal and timeless womanhood, arguing that it presents women as silent ciphers who need to be inscribed with male meaning in order to be voiced. I conclude that any discourse that reverts to a conception of an original or natural womanhood as the basis for female authority and influence fails to account for the complexity inherent within the notion of gender and, ultimately, proves itself to be profoundly exclusionary and essentialist. As such, Brown's operation within the heterosexual matrix renders any expression outside of that schema as deviant. His idealised notion of reproductive and normative physicality alienates other(ed) bodies, figuring them in direct opposition, and as literal threats to, a deified system of good bodies. Of particularly irony is the fact that the novel claims to offer female empowerment – a claim I reveal to be radically untrue.

The Da Vinci Code: A New Feminism or an Old, Old Tale?

Most of the critical attention given to The Da Vinci Code has predictably been focussed on its religious implications.³ Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Archbishop of Northern Genoa spoke out against the novel in 2005, condemning it as “a sack full of lies against the Church, against the real history of Christianity and against Christ himself” (MSNBC, 2005). Indeed, its perceived challenge to religious teachings has drawn the focus of much of Cardinal Bertone's argument away from evaluative analysis of Brown's so-called “obsess[ion] with radical feminist notions” (Miesel and Olson, 2003), as manifested in his approach to women's position within both established religion and society. In this regard, the novel does make several startling claims; none of which, Brown stresses, are modern. Far from dismissing the Christian religion as fundamentally patriarchal (something feminist scholars such as Mary Daly

³ A lexis-nexis newspaper or internet search reveals that the vast majority of results involve the controversy regarding the religious focus of the novel.

[1968, 1974] have been claiming for years), Brown instead labels Christ the “original feminist” (Brown, 2003: 334) and claims that most subsequent patriarchal Christian doctrine originates from the Roman Catholic Church.

Brown defines what he terms “the sacred feminine” (Brown, 2003: 42) as the lost feminine principle in religion, a reverence which needs to be re-captured in order for a natural balance to be attained. Despite the seemingly radical nature of Brown’s argument for the return of this sacred feminine, the tradition of seeing women as the semi-divine yet earthly pathway to male spiritual enlightenment is hardly new. As the novel suggests, it has a long historical lineage in all forms of Western arts. Whilst Brown lists some of these influences, other major philosophical threads of his thinking can also be traced back several centuries. The literary theme of woman representing the holy ideal to which men must aspire, and of women leading men to spiritual connection, was particularly present in professions of courtly love from Dante to Petrarch and beyond.⁴ The Petrarchan tradition, in particular, popularised a representational custom whereby women were figured as the muse and spiritual beacon for men’s upliftment. Though “achieving fruition and fame through the 366-poem *Rime Sparse* of Francesco Petrarca (1304-74)” (Moore, 2000: 6), Petrarchism has expanded beyond Petrarch himself to help “form ideas of eroticism and conventions of female beauty still current today” (Moore, 2000: 27). Petrarchism has been seen as a highly patriarchal form, though it has occasionally been adopted by women, who have attempted to subvert its ideology (Dubrow, 1995 and Moore, 2000). Similar trends in representing women found their visual expression in much of the artwork of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the 19th century.⁵ Curiously, whilst these past movements, particularly Petrarchism, have been critiqued strongly in terms of their essentialist, heterosexist and passive view of women (Vickers, 1981), similar issues in Brown’s novel appear to have been accepted as radically “empowering” to women.

⁴ Moore examines the influence of Dante on Petrarch, saying he “foreshadows the idealized beauty...that helped Petrarch idealize and distance the beloved lady in ways that infuse the mode of Petrarchism” (2000: 30).

⁵ One of the Brotherhood’s key figures, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is credited by Laurent with “creating an ideal of feminine beauty, both sensuous and pure” (Laurent, 2004). Fleming (1967: 3) documents Petrarch and Dante as being among Rossetti’s literary influences.

The relegation of women to a series of body parts, a characteristic I examine both in Brown's novel and, in the following chapter, in Ensler's play, also has a long history of literary representation. Vickers (1981: 266) explains, with specific reference to Petrarchan representation:

Laura is always presented as a part or parts of a woman...Specifically Petrarchan...is the obsessive insistence on the particular, an insistence that would in turn generate multiple texts on individual fragments of the body or on the beauties of women.

Indeed, Hillman and Mazzio (1997: xiv) call the early modern period in Europe the "age of synecdoche," since it was characterised by "elaborated attention given to the body part *in and of itself*" (Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: xiv).⁶ Often endowed with qualities of "intention and subjectivity" (Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: xix), body parts were seen as possessing some inherent power of their own. In art, for instance, Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Dürer all produced portraits of individual organs in their own right, granting to the part the same elevated position as was previously reserved for people (Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: xiv). Nowhere, however, was this synecdochal trend more aptly shown than in the tradition of the anatomical blazon, a poetic convention whereby the beloved is figuratively dissected into body parts, which are then addressed and praised by the poet as if they are the woman herself (Vickers in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 4).⁷ Though clearly drawing from Petrarchan modes of the worship of the beloved, Vickers reminds us that the anatomical blazon's relationship with Petrarchism "was by no means a simple one" (in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 6). She explains that the "independent genre" of the anatomical blazon had its identifiable origin in the second quarter of the sixteenth century when a blazon contest was developed amongst the most respected men of letters in France (in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 4). I show, then, that Brown's notion of the sacred feminine bears startling similarity to Dante's idealised representation of Beatrice and Petrarch's anatomised one of Laura.

⁶Hillman and Mazzio loosely place the Early Modern period in the "sixteenth- and seventeenth-century" (Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: xi).

⁷ Significantly, the blazon tradition occurred at almost precisely the same time as medical advances into the human body, brought about by the idea of human dissection and anatomising. The authors of the blazons were also popularly known as *anatomistes* (Vickers in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 7).

The structure of the novel's Priory of Sion is very suggestive of some of the aforementioned historical movements. As we are lovingly informed by Robert Langdon, a Harvard symbologist called in by the French police to solve a high-profile murder, the Priory is a secret historical organisation headed by "Grand Masters" with a long and illustrious tradition of gathering together to celebrate the "sacred feminine" (Brown, 2003: 158). This is revealed to be a set of philosophical beliefs about women captured and celebrated in various artistic traditions throughout the centuries. Ostensibly, of course, it is the essence of womanhood that is celebrated, but underlying these beliefs is a tacit understanding (and simultaneous creation) of the role of women in relation to that of men. Thus, a set of power relations are set up whereby women are celebrated for their seemingly powerful place within society. In actuality, however, this place is limited, and women are marginalised by the very process supposedly used to celebrate them. In this manner, the novel's gender discourse functions as yet another regulatory and repressive fiction, a "technology of gender" (De Lauretis, 1987: 5), presented in the guise of reverential reappraisal – as will be discussed later in this chapter.

In The Da Vinci Code, women are cast as spiritually superior to men due to their ability to carry life inside their bodies. Again, this problematic relegation of women to wombs, and their separation from secular (the implication being male) spheres of life through deified professions of adoration is hardly modern. This tradition of allying female representation with reproductive potential is in direct contrast to another which Brown utilises, that of associating women with the earthly body and men with more spiritual and intellectual pursuits. Reminiscent of the angel/whore dichotomy described by Gilbert and Gubar (1979: 34), women would seem in this novel to be both idealised goddesses and earth-mothers, an extreme representational split that, in reality, represents no women at all.

The gendered politics of the Priory's "Hieros Gamos" sex rite that Sophie inadvertently witnesses (Brown, 2003: 196-7) are also revealing. The use of the Ancient Greek term "Hieros Gamos" lends a mythic authenticity to the ceremony and locates it, and its resulting notions of a natural (hetero)sexuality, in the distant past. This, in turn, increases the hegemonic power of Brown's discourse. Not only are women portrayed in the novel as spiritually superior to men, but they are also

associated with a timeless quality of essential feminine wisdom. This wisdom, it is assumed, is carried bodily and is linked intrinsically to some shared female physical experience. The wisdom is further shown to be one that men can only glimpse, as we see in the novel's ending. Langdon, gazing at the Louvre pyramids that, we are to assume, mark the hiding place of the Holy Grail, imagines he hears echoes of a woman's voice:

For a moment, he thought he heard a woman's voice...the wisdom of the ages...whispering up from the chasms of the earth (Brown, 2003: 593).

Appropriately, he hears nothing but the faint whispers of this anonymous female voice, and it seems to emanate from the "chasms of the earth" – traditionally the realm of the dark, the unexplored, the female (Irigaray, 2002: 30). Even here, at her final resting place, the body of Mary Magdalene is "adorned in Masters' loving art" and resting "beneath the starry skies" (Brown, 2003: 591-2).⁸ A distinctly male realm, the Louvre, like most classic art museums, houses paintings of women, largely by (and often for) men. Here, the Grail is surrounded by the works of other types of grand masters of the more secular kind, famous for freezing and capturing the so-called feminine essence in paint. Surrounded in effigy by her artistic representation, praised by men who are dead and gone, and covered by the male sky, the only symbolically female space mentioned is the "chasm" of the earth (from which these mysterious and half-imagined whisperings emanate). Again, the fact that these voices are not, and never can be, fully heard is significant. Women in the tradition explored by Brown are only spoken *about*, rarely speaking of their own agency. This can be seen as yet another parallel to the lauded, yet passive, Petrarchan Laura. The unidentified woman's voice that seems to emanate from the earth at the end of the novel is also spoken of as "the wisdom of ages" (Brown, 2003: 593). This association of women with ancient wisdom is, as the novel suggests, hardly new. What the novel does not explore, however, is the problematically essentialist aspect of this superficially empowering tradition that occurs as soon as assumptions are made about the category of woman.

⁸ If the earth is considered the feminine, the sky is its binary opposite – the masculine realm (Irigaray, 2002: 136).

The Da Vinci Code looks to the past in multiple ways. Against a backdrop of historic artworks and ancient architectural splendour, we find philosophical theories on sex from centuries past reworked for a modern generation. This novel, therefore, is not forward-looking in gender theory, indeed, it does not purport to be. Many of Brown's claims may appear empowering since they reverse the traditionally patriarchal notions that emphasise women's spiritual, moral and intellectual inferiority to men. Ultimately, however, they fail to offer women any real sense of agency. A mere reversal of terms is not enough to challenge repressive systems of meaning. Although Brown's philosophical threads are drawn from past traditions of reverence for women, these traditions are themselves steeped in problematic and silencing characteristics. As such, they offer no real solution to the power imbalances underlying contemporary life. By invoking (and thereby creating) a specific and defined womanhood, he reinscribes oppressive gendered norms. He also marginalises and silences any bodies that fall outside of his schema.

And He Made Them Equal and Opposite: Symbolism, Equality and the Binary.

Brown's plot hinges on a complex series of verbal and physical puzzles, all of which reinforce the notion of a joining of opposites to create a perfect union of contrasting objects:

Two cryptexes. Everything in pairs. Double entendres. Male female. Black nested within white. Langdon felt the web of symbolism stretching outward (Brown, 2003: 427).

Just as there can only be one answer to each riddle, one code to open each cryptex, so can there be only one conclusion to the text's overwhelming narrative drive: sex and sexuality are (or rather, should be) a perfect match of the equal and opposite. As we have seen, Brown mythologises sexuality to this end, placing it in a prediscursive domain. His "construction of sex as the radically unconstructed" (Butler, 1999: 11) results in Langdon and Neveau's (as well as, by default, the reader's) thrill in unveiling the secrets of an original sexuality, when, in fact, they are complicit in the construction of just such a notion.

The Priory of Sion is central to Brown's construction of sexuality. Despite their rhetoric of equality and empowerment, however, analysis reveals that agency, power and words themselves belong to the men in this tradition. It is men who have discursive power in the creation of women's sexual identity in the novel. We are informed by various characters that the secrets of the Grail itself – or herself – have been patrilineally passed from generation to generation.⁹ The historical trail of Grand Masters so carefully plotted in the novel act in a Knights Templar role, as the guardians of the truth about women's religious roles. Just as the age of chivalry (and its philosophical extension in Petrarchan modes) is associated unwaveringly with an idealisation of womanhood – an idealism that is upheld precisely by the silenced and symbolic nature of the woman herself – the Priory, and thus the book, is infused with this same ideal of gendered knowledge and power. What these organisations and artistic traditions have in common with the Priory is a conception of women as purer beings than men. Celebrated as the unattainable, the absolute, and the embodiment of deep, spiritual meaning, women are seen as guides for enlightenment. Such power can only be a reflected one, can only exist in relation to another gendered identity. Indeed, Freccero (in Stanivukovic ed, 2001: 24) suggests that “the lady celebrated by Petrarch is a brilliant surface, a pure signifier whose momentary exteriority to the poet serves as an Archimedean point from which he can create himself.” She finds this “manifest by the inscription of fame (*lauro*, gendered masculine) in the name of the beloved (*Laura*, gendered feminine)” (in Stanivukovic ed, 2001: 23).

The category of woman is, therefore, created and controlled in relation to the oppositional category of man. Safely within the tightly bound, strongly hetero-normative framework of this construction, each term is defined by, and reliant on, the other to make the very specific sorts of normative assumptions Brown utilises in this novel. In Butler's terminology:

The internal coherence or unity of gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces a univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system (Butler, 1999: 30).

⁹ The telling and problematic implications of associating women with an inanimate object will be discussed in more detail later. It is, however, worth noting at this point in the analysis.

The Hieros Gamos rite perfectly exemplifies this “stable and oppositional” gendered relationship that is designed to create an “institutional heterosexuality.” Additionally, it serves as a performative reminder of the concept of timeless and ahistorical sexuality that is necessary for situating its gendered construction as natural. The fundamental suppositions behind the ceremony are the celebration of the reproductive power of the female, and the attainment of divine communion for the male. How women attain divine communion is not clarified or, significantly, even relevant. Indeed, the assumption is that they are already half-divine:

Sex begot new life – the ultimate miracle – and miracles could be performed only by a god. The ability of a woman to produce life from her womb made her sacred. A god (Brown, 2003: 411).

Drawing again from Butler’s gender theories, we recall the social need and narrative drive for a “regulated symmetry of desire” (Butler, 1991: 30) in order to both maintain and strengthen the binary system of sex difference we have ourselves created. As this text deals very strongly in a heterosexual ideal coupling of society, one would expect to find the perceived social and biological differences between male and female clearly delineated. The sheer magnitude of this narrative explanatory occurrence, however, is overwhelming. Brown takes the concept on board at every textual turn, weaving binary differences into the very plot of his novel. From the artwork of Leonardo da Vinci and the novels of Victor Hugo, to the animations of Walt Disney, large portions of Western culture are read to be a reflection of the idealised male/female heterosexual binary. Brown’s interpretation of religions from Hinduism to Christianity are also read in this manner, with church structures built to reflect a sacred feminine form. Binaries are everywhere apparent, from the dual, yet tonally oppositional, cryptexes, to the professed symbolism of the twin and, once again directly oppositional, glass pyramids at the Louvre. Not only does this occur at an explicit level, but also at a symbolic and metatextual one: Brown bombards the reader with apparent evidence of the type of sexual paradigm he would have us see as natural and universal.

Men and women are seen as both physical and symbolic inversions of each other, as demonstrated by Langdon's explanation of what he identifies as ancient symbolic diagrams for the sexes:

This icon is formally known as the blade, and it represents aggression and manhood...the female symbol, as you might imagine, is the exact opposite (Brown, 2003: 321).

In addition, the symbols chosen to encapsulate masculine or feminine experience are literally the blade and the chalice, or the phallus and the womb. Thus, once again, we have a problematic case of synecdoche, of defining the meaning of woman from an assumed set of essential parts. This is highly reminiscent of Enslar's approach to womanhood in The Vagina Monologues, as discussed in chapter three.

Notably, very specific body parts are chosen as the central images or identifiers of each sex. For the man, the traditional phallus is in the shape of the blade. This accordingly has gendered connotations of virility, aggression and action. The woman, however, is the symbolic passive vessel, the womb, the receptacle for the male seed. Whilst the penis carries multiple associations of sexuality and virility, the uterus only carries one associated function – reproduction. The choice of the uterus as the physical core of womanhood and not, for example, the ovaries (organs which imply active involvement in the creative process of reproduction), confine women to a passive role as the traditional carrier of life.

Once again, in the symbolism of the blade and the chalice, we see that men and women are defined and represented in relation to each other. In this novel, as with its fellow bestseller The Bible, it is the heterosexual relationship alone that is sanctified as divine. Examples of “divine proportion” (Brown, 2003: 134) are to be found everywhere, Brown argues, and this delicately balanced relationship between the sexes is the prime example of it. As Butler cautions, however:

The recourse to an original or genuine sexuality is a nostalgic and parochial ideal that refuses the contemporary demand to formulate an account of gender as a complex cultural construction. This ideal tends not only to serve culturally conservative aims, but to constitute an exclusionary practice within feminism, precipitating precisely the kind of fragmentation that the ideal purpose purports to overcome (Butler, 1999: 46-7).

The Hieros Gamos ceremony's ritualised acts are a fascinating insight into the novel's understanding of sex. It is an example of just the kind of "recourse to an original or genuine sexuality" that Butler critiques. Further, I argue that it has the same negative consequences of exclusion and conservative normativity that she identifies. In yet another reference to the oppositional gendered binary Brown constructs, ceremony participants are dressed oppositionally; men in black, women in white. All are masked, emphasising their anonymity, their reversion to universal types. The ritualised chanting is in two sections – female, then male. The women chant:

'I was with you in the beginning, in the dawn of all that is holy, I bore you from the womb before the start of day' (Brown, 2003: 413).

The use of the universal "I" for the female chant suggests an all-encompassing femaleness, a sense of womanhood that is collective and shared and tied very much to a sense of common physicality. Further, this bodily bond seems strongly based in their role in reproduction. Clutching obviously symbolic "golden orbs" (Brown, 2003: 413), these women extol their supposedly universal reproductive role as the fundamental building block of life and religion.

As Butler notes:

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (Butler, 1999: 33).

What could be more performative than the Hieros Gamos ceremony; supposedly a stage for the celebratory enactment of a pre-existent, natural sexuality but, in actuality, one for its construction and maintenance? This conception of womanhood is cast as timeless, having existed "in the beginning...before the start of day." It is upheld as both a common and idealised female essence, presumably to be revered and remembered in the confusion of modern day identity politics.

This essentialist outlook is maintained by Langdon, as he chastises his male students in class:

'The next time you find yourself with a woman, look in your heart and see if you cannot approach sex as a mystical, spiritual union. Challenge yourself to find that spark of divinity that men can achieve only through union with the sacred feminine.'

The women smiled knowingly, nodding (Brown, 2003: 412-3).

Here, again, women are seen as a universal type. Langdon is urging the men in the lecture theatre not to view the women they have sex with in their own right, but as illusions of a pre-linguistic and thus natural gendered category which is only being described, not manufactured. Of course, as Butler demonstrates, this concept of eternal womanhood is and has always been a myth perpetrated for very specific political aims. Sandra Gilbert comments perceptively on this notion:¹⁰

She [the woman writer] must come to terms with...those mythic masks male artists¹¹ have fastened over her human face both to lessen the dread of her 'inconstancy' and – by identifying her with the 'eternal types' they have themselves invented – to possess her more thoroughly (Gilbert in Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:17).

Yet, there is no doubt that such a concept of female sexuality can prove initially empowering, as Angela Carter sardonically points out:

It is a most self-enhancing notion, I have almost seduced myself with it. Any woman may manage, in luxurious self-deceit, to feel herself for a little while one with great, creating nature, fertile, open, pulsing, anonymous and so forth. In doing so, she loses herself completely and loses her partner also (Carter, 1979: 5).

In this regard, the female students' mysteriously knowing (yet notably silent) smiles are perhaps indicative of the satisfaction that such flattery can bring.

Much of the novel's phenomenal mainstream success, however, can be attributed to Brown's clever reading of trends in feminist thought. The popularity of New Age theories and esoteria has made mythic pasts fashionable, particularly to women's

¹⁰ Though in this case explicitly referring to the woman writer, Gilbert's point can be applied to all meanings of the word 'authority,' and can thus be extended to include situations of women's subjectivity outside of the specificity of female literary endeavours.

¹¹ This notion of "mythic masks" is of course complicated by Riviere's own theory of "the masquerade" (Riviere, 1999: 94), whereby women are active agents in their own feminising representation. No matter whether men or women themselves represent women in this manner, though, the belief in any stable sense of woman- and man-hood must be seen as a mythic construction.

movements. Carter takes a scathing look at the early beginnings of what was to become this popularised goddess tradition:

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women...are consolatory nonsenses...Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place (Carter, 1979: 5).

Despite the carefully crafted appearance of equality between binary opposites, and the wealth of material providing for “luxurious self-deceit,” close examination reveals that gender inequalities are apparent throughout the novel.

Brown assures us that in the Hieros Gamos ceremony, as with every aspect of the Priory, the female holds an equal ranking with the male, that they are spiritual equals. We find as the plot unfolds, however, that this is not true. The Priory’s top ranking members are, and have always been, male. In a tellingly self-deprecating moment toward the end of the novel, Marie Chauval, the wife of murdered Grand Master Jacques Saunier, admits her true place in the Priory:

I have never officially been privy to the present location of the Grail. But, of course, I was married to a person of enormous influence...and my women’s intuition is strong (Brown, 2003: 585).

Here, not only is her true role exposed as mere companion, not of high enough rank to be privy to the secrets of her husband “of enormous influence,” but she is also relegated to the female realm of the intuitive, the irrational, the instinctual. This is in direct opposition to her husband, whose complex linguistic and structural riddles place him firmly within the male realm of logic. Indeed, when this apparently equal spiritual relationship between the sexes is explored, we notice the passivity of the feminine even at a linguistic level:

Holy men, who had once required sexual union with their spiritual counterparts to commune with God, now feared their natural sexual urges as the work of the devil (Brown, 2003: 174).

Again, it is the men who “require” sexual union, and the women’s function, presumably, to provide it. Even more revealingly, the gender of the “spiritual counterpart” is never explicitly stated. As with all of the sexual unions lauded in this novel, we are left to assume its heterosexual nature. This, once again, points to the hetero-normativity that the novel works both to create and maintain, whilst projecting its assumptions as natural.

Brown’s description of the lost scripture of Mary Magdalene speaks of her role as being deified or uplifted by Christ, “If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her?” (Brown, 2003: 333):

It was not Mary Magdalene’s royal blood that concerned the Church as much as her consorting with Christ, who *also* had royal blood (Brown, 2003: 335).

Here again, we see that it is really the male lineage that is seen as the powerful, and thus threatening, one. This is in direct contrast with Brown’s earlier efforts to assure his reader that Mary’s lineage was from as high a ranking as Jesus’ to maintain the blood-line equality of the coupling (Brown, 2003: 335). Despite all attempts to stress the contrary, Mary’s role is ultimately summed up by Teabing when he says:

Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the Chalice that bore the holy bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage, and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth (Brown, 2003: 331).

In a text that celebrates the male quest for knowledge of the sacred feminine, the seeming incongruity of the Priory’s very male lineage of leadership is conveniently overlooked. Women in this novel are everywhere assured of their centrality and equality, but nowhere given them in any meaningful manner. As the female half of the questing duo, Neveu demonstrates equal, if not often superior, intellectual ability. Yet the final confrontation with Teabing is figured quite consciously as a damsel in distress situation, with Langdon given the opportunity to prove himself worthy of the Grail by defending Neveu (Brown, 2003: 554). As the only woman with any real power, she appears to be the figurehead for an empty tradition – nowhere is her agency matched in any other narrative arena. The ideal of women in this text is very much the ideal of Old Testament women. That is, they exist both socially and

physically only in relation to their men. In this case, men who are figured as the questing subjects in search of the Petrarchan object. In the name of reversing the centuries-old power inequalities levelled against women, then, Brown's reversion to standard conceptions of sex roles both creates and reinforces the concept of a pure binary sex system through clearly physically distinguishable bodies.

Go Forth And Multiply: Brown in the Light of Butler's Heterosexual Matrix

Brown's novel draws on a standard western feminist critique of history's (specifically religious history's) male bias. It is filled with examples of men being deified and celebrated at the expense of women, and creates a parallel of the masculine being lauded at the expense of the feminine. He seeks to right this balance, drawing attention to the sacred feminine. This argument, however, rests on a bounded meaning being inscribed not only between the terms of male and female, but between the concepts of masculine and feminine, both of which, he constructs to reflect the same basic, binary pattern. In authoritatively discussing these terms, Brown's text conceals the fact that he is constantly creating them, and creating them for very specific political ends. Indeed, far from disrupting the traditionally restrictive and oppressive gendered relationship he is critiquing, Brown ends up reinforcing much of it. His text still locates itself firmly within the tradition of the binary. In Butlerian terms, his novel both reflects, and is a part of, the "cultural matrix" (Butler, 1999: 23) that encompasses our views of gender: it creates whilst seeming only to describe.

Given the evidence of the previous pages, we can see Butler's theory of the heterosexual matrix in operation. Brown's theory rests on an implicit, idealised heterosexual union between men and women, whom he sees as separate and oppositional (more analysis of which can be found in the following section). Not only is the heterosexual union celebrated in religion (though the female element has been, he argues, forgotten through centuries of patriarchal Christian church doctrine), it is also celebrated in art, architecture, film and literature. Indeed, all of western history and culture is read as an expression and celebration of this union. The book's cleverness rests to a great extent on its fusion of various, diverse elements of western culture. The history of a select offering of western culture is made to speak Brown's message, the code that he reveals the key to cracking.

The idea of puzzles and solutions pervade this book. Eventually, these intricate series of puzzles within puzzles (like the cryptex within the cryptex), lead to only one conclusion. The answer to the riddle, indeed the symbology of the entire mystery, ultimately rests on the concept of idealised heterosexual union. Just as keys fit locks and codes open cryptexes, all Brown's intricacy leads to the ultimate connection and fit of two bodies. This fit is, once again, symbolised by the blade and chalice shapes that lock together so satisfactorily. Western culture may be made to speak in riddles and codes, but the answer is always one thing – the heterosexual union. At a linguistic, symbolic and literal level, then, this text not only lauds but practically deifies this pairing. Brown describes it as the “spiritual pairing” by which the male can find “spiritual wholeness and communion with God” (Brown, 2003: 411). The gate of gendered meaning is magically opened when confronted with the deified and crudely obvious metaphorical “perfect fit” of key in lock, penis in vagina:

Sophie aligned the key's triangular shaft with the hole and inserted it, sliding it in until the entire shaft had disappeared. This key apparently required no turning. Instantly, the gate began to swing open (Brown, 2003: 241).

There is also an implied, yet insistent, sense of physical normativity implicit in the term “perfect fit.” This functions once again to subtly inscribe an ideal(ised) body from which there is, literally, no space for deviation.

As Foucault comments,

And so in the ‘question of sex’...two processes emerge...we demand that sex speak the truth (but, since it is a secret and is oblivious to its own nature, we reserve for ourselves the function of telling the truth of the truth, revealed and deciphered at last), and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply *buried* truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness (Foucault, 1978: 69).

Brown reveals the “truth” about sex, a truth which the reader is allowed to discover with the characters. Truth, literally, is made to speak, particularly through the mysterious goddess voice that only Langdon is able to hear, “*The truth is right before your eyes, Robert. He knew not from where the epiphany came*” (Brown, 2001: 554).

The only space (physical or textual) set aside for a non-heteronormative reality is the infamous Bois de Boulogne. Brown describes it as the “underbelly of Paris leering in the shadows” (Brown, 2003: 221) and the “purgatory for freaks and fetishists” (Brown, 2003: 216). This is a place of grotesque sexual deviance and inspires only horror for Langdon. Indeed, he describes it to us as the living, “dark and twisted” equivalent of the Bosch painting of the same name (Brown, 2003: 216). Associations with hellfire, torture and unnaturalness are thereby made with the subject matter at hand, ostensibly prostitution, but with several other connotations. So what *do* we see in this place? An apparently gay man, “flexing his buttocks,” twin girls, presumably offering similarly heterosexually ambiguous sexual favours,¹² and a woman who lifts her skirt to reveal that she is “not, in fact, a woman” (Brown, 2003: 216). In short, “male, female, and everything in between” is on offer to “satisfy ones deepest unspoken desires” (Brown, 2003: 216) for homosexual, intersexual or transsexual encounters, all in the field of prostitution. It is not just prostitution that the main characters seem to find so distasteful, however. Brown’s delight in listing the various types of bodies and lifestyles on display for hire firmly shifts the textual emphasis from the act of prostitution to the type of acts proffered for engagement. As such, there appears to be an implicit moral judgment on all types of sexuality that break the bounds of acceptability. Characters whose bodies do not conform to the mainstream, natural bodily expressions of society are somehow marked and set apart. Langdon’s horrified reaction to what he sees in the Bois de Boulogne calls to mind Butler’s theory:

The very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of these ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined (Butler, 1999: 23).

Foucault additionally comments that “For a long time hermaphrodites were criminals, or crime’s offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union” (Foucault, 1978: 38).

¹² Presumably, however, this homosexual insinuation is merely a tantalising display for the heterosexual client. The need for the implied masculine audience once again negates any authentic lesbian experience on the grounds that it does not involve the male element. In this way, the heterosexual (and thus normative/normalising) gaze is once again presumed, since, for Brown, sexuality cannot exist without it. The threat of non-male (and, therefore, uncontained and dangerous) sexuality, is, however, explored in this performative taboo/tableau.

Brown's representation of the sexually and criminally deviant intersexual body, of course, in no way discourages this conservative view. Indeed, the only natural expression of sexuality and bodily completeness, it would seem, is a non-threateningly heterosexual and physically normative one. After all, as Butler reminds us:

The heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female' (Butler, 1999: 23).

Again, Butler's emphasis on the sexed action (Butler, 1999: 33) reminds us that the most disturbing notion of intersexuality for the viewer is not the physical blurring of gendered boundaries, but the confusion of the terms of hetero- and homosexuality. However, she also cautions that examples of intersexuality, though disruptive to the normalising "law," can also paradoxically strengthen it, by their very otherness. It is in this manner that Brown's Bois De Boulogne episode is designed to function. Langdon's response to the sights of the Bois de Boulogne, an anguished "heaven help me!" (Brown, 2003: 216), illustrates the confusion and terror difference inspires in the matricised viewer (as a threat to the gendered symmetry of the matrix itself). It also sets a clear moral marker for the reader, situating the implied acts, and bodies, within (or more specifically, outside) a religious and moral framework. The fact that both main characters are not only adverse to this kind of behaviour, but are actively threatened by it, adds a very persuasive element to this already seething moral fable.

By contrast, when we are finally let into Neveu's memories of accidentally witnessing the Priory sex ritual, the setting for the act itself is figured in particularly positive terms. Set underground, in the symbolically female space of the earth, this natural enclosure is positively pastoral in its affirming associations:

The room was a grotto – a coarse chamber that appeared to have been hollowed from the granite of the hillside. The only light came from the torches on the walls (Brown, 2003: 196).

Brown's text overflows with heterosexist, binary ideology. We find statements such as:

Intercourse was the revered union of the two halves of the human spirit – male and female – through which the male could find spiritual wholeness and communion with God (Brown, 2003: 411).

The type of intercourse spoken of here is clearly presumed to be penetrative and heterosexual. The heterosexist bias of the text extends not only from failing to envision any alternative, but also from the implicit assumption that only heterosexual, penetrative sex is a sanctified act. Brown also makes reference to the human spirit being split into two halves, corresponding perfectly to the simplistic gender binary he invokes. Overwhelmingly, we find this text playing into age-old notions of sexual stereotypes, even as it tried to remake them to capture the imagination of a new millennium of gender-sensitive consumers.¹³ Men and women are different, this book suggests, but they are so for a reason. This reason is that, when they combine together, they achieve a divine state – they fit together and, in the process, achieve spiritual completion. They are opposites in every way, symbolic and otherwise, and (as per the natural laws of the universe), opposites attract. Naturally. With the examples of the Priory of Sion's sex rite and the promotion of the idea that Jesus was married, (hetero)sexual union is, therefore, shown to be a sacred act, bringing people (though really just men) closer to God. It is figured as natural and right, a sacred and balanced union of universal energy. Where does this leave people with different desires, let alone different bodies?

Unsurprisingly, the emphasis is solely on reproductive sex being lauded as a spiritual act. This leaves no place for sexual acts that do not fall within the reproductive parameters, be they hetero- or homosexual, nor does it account for men and women who cannot reproduce. These problematic elements to Brown's philosophy function to replicate the very exclusionary practices of female negation Brown apparently seeks to challenge in patriarchal society (if women are deemed holy and worthy due to their life-giving role, what place does an infertile woman occupy, what power can she claim? What is a woman without her womb?). The exclusionary and regulatory

¹³ Naomi Klein examines the economic potential for exploiting current issues, noting that businesspeople "realized that people who saw themselves as belonging to oppressed groups were ready-made market niches: throw a few liberal platitudes their way and, presto, you're not just a product but an ally in the struggle" (Klein, 2001: 113). She speaks of the "orgy of red Malcom X baseball hats and Silence=Death t-shirts...the sexy wave of 'Do-Me Feminism' in *Esquire* and 'Lesbian Chic' in *New York* and *Newsweek*" (Klein, 2001: 111) that were produced in response to racial and gendered social awareness.

“heterosexual matrix” of Butler’s Gender Trouble could not be more firmly in operation.

The continuation of Christ’s bloodline, of course, is wholly dependant on reproductive bodies. The implication is that it has always been women who provide passageways to the divine for men – a role once believed to be the sole purview of the churches. Mary Magdalene is spoken of in metaphoric and even literal terms as “the womb” (Brown, 2003: 335). Other terminologies for her include “the vessel,” “chalice” and “vine” – all carriers for that which is important, useful or notable. Synecdoche is again in operation here, but with uneasy consequences of essentialism. For example, Teabing lays out five explicit criteria for what he terms a “female life:”

The rose has always been the premiere symbol of female sexuality. In primitive goddess cults, the five petals represented the five stations of female life – birth, menstruation, motherhood, menopause and death (Brown, 2003: 341).

All of these “stations” are bodily-based, some more problematically essentialist than others. The concept that motherhood is, or should be, one of the most important stages of a woman’s life has often been a contentious issue with feminists, but even to presume a commonality in physical phenomena such as menstruation is to assign a symbolic significance to the body that can often not be held to certain women’s experiences. For instance, amenorrhoea, the absence of menstruation, can commonly occur in women for a variety of reasons including poor nutrition, extreme exercise and uterine abnormality or, in the case of hysterectomy or congenital conditions, lack of a uterus (McKesson Corporation, 2005).

The Da Vinci Code, then, whilst desanctifying Jesus, functions to deify the human – specifically reproductive female – body. However, the type of body upheld as the ideal is a very select one, and one that acts in certain extremely specific ways. The old binary of the masculine spirit and feminine body is reinscribed. Brown, therefore, is not challenging gender as radically as the furore surrounding his work would seem to suggest. In actuality, Brown takes us back to the days of unproblematically bodily-based gender roles. This is a backward looking text, doing little to address the very real gender complexities of modern day life, yet implicitly claiming to offer an

idealised way of living to the modern reader. This philosophy is more exclusionary and coercive than it would initially appear. Far from offering women more choices and empowering them with different ways of being in the world, Brown offers them the same staid options of pre-feminist ideology (marriage, children), repackaging them in a shrewdly new age, bestseller format. Brown merely reverses the binary's terms, and does not challenge them.

The Body Politic: Unsanctioned Bodies, Unsanctioned Acts and Villainous Desires.

Until she learns the symbolism behind his actions, Neveu's reaction to secretly witnessing her grandfather's participation in the Hieros Gamos sexual ritual is one of utter horror; horror that seems, upon reflection, somewhat disproportionate to the act itself:

Sophie felt a knot tighten in her stomach...for ten years she had tried to forget the incident that had confirmed that horrifying fact for her. She had witnessed something unthinkable. *Unforgivable* (Brown, 2003: 157. Italics original).

She can only accept this act of perceived sexual deviancy when she is informed of the religious, ritual, and, therefore, safe, bounds that her grandfather operated within. Sexual acts that fall outside of a limited social parameter are clearly frowned upon in this text.

It is later made clear that the woman "straddling" (Brown, 2001: 414) Sauniere was none other than his wife, Marie Chauval. We see this not only in her long silver hair, which is a feature carefully dwelt upon in both instances of textual description of her, but also in the final stages of the novel. It is then that she admits to meeting covertly with her husband in order to perform "certain ceremonies though the orchestration of the Priory" (Brown, 2003: 580). Naturally, the fact that the woman having sex with Sauniere in his basement was always his wife, lends an unsurprisingly tame twist to the ritual – the only transgressive element of the ceremony would seem to be its witnesses. Officially sanctioned, by religious laws anyway, the ceremony rapidly becomes less pagan and more mainstream. The heroes of the piece still operate from within the convention of the Christian marriage ceremony. Again, the fact that she is required to meet with her husband only to perform "certain acts" (meetings for any

other purpose were deemed too dangerous) suggests that her contribution to the Priory, her value, is as nothing more than a traditional sex object, despite the presentation and argument to the contrary.

At a physical level, the characters in the novel provide a wealth of insight into the hidden (and sometimes even overt) body politics operating in the text. Both Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu are described as physically pleasing.¹⁴ Langdon's "sharp blue eyes...strong jaw and dimpled chin" (Brown, 2003: 22) are specifically dwelt upon, and his ageing is referenced by his grey temples, a fact which a female colleague suggests implies the dignity of wisdom (Brown, 2003: 23). Neveu, meanwhile, is described in glowing terms as rounded and wholesome looking, with subtle suggestions of reproductive potential:

Unlike the waifish, cookie-cutter blondes that adorned Harvard dorm room walls, this woman was genuinely healthy with an unembellished beauty and genuineness that radiated from a striking personal confidence (Brown, 2003: 79).

Neveu's glowing "healthiness" – set, as it is, in opposition to the term "waifish" – is a clear euphemism for a more rounded figure (and, presumably, natural beauty). This ethos is radically undercut, however, in Neveu's reminiscing of the Hieros Gamos ceremony she witnessed, "Straddling her grandfather was a naked woman wearing a white mask...Her body was plump, far from perfect" (Brown, 2003: 414). Despite an attempt at a progressive undercutting of modern Western beauty standards, Brown's emphasis on other attributes also play directly into other representational tropes of women's natural and healthy role of reproduction. Later, we discover, Neveu is of the bloodline of Christ. Like her estranged brother, whom she is reunited with later in the novel, she carries the representational blood mark of Christ: her long, red hair. Physical demarcation, then, is utilised to signify social (and moral) positioning in the text.

By contrast, the villains of the piece, Silas, Sir Teabing and Remy are all-too physically fallible. Their bodies are marked by either outward physical difference or

¹⁴ Significantly, Robert Langdon is repeatedly referred to by his surname, whilst his female counterpart is always referred to as "Sophie." This suggests a positioning of authority that structurally undercuts once again Brown's argument for perfectly equal and oppositional pairing between the sexes.

less apparent physical weaknesses that render them noticeably identifiable from the strong, bullish Inspector Fache, the “captivating presence” (Brown, 2003: 24) of Langdon and the “unembellished beauty” (Brown, 2003: 79) of Neveu. In both Sir Teabing and Remy’s cases, it is their bodily constitution that brings about their downfall. Sir Leigh’s leg braces incapacitate him at the crucial moment of seizing the cryptex (Brown, 2003: 555), in the process setting off the alarms and alerting the police to his entrance, and Remy’s hidden peanut allergy provides for a swift, though tortured, end for him (Brown, 2003: 506). Silas’ death, though not a direct result of any bodily defect, is figured strongly in terms of his albinism – a characteristic that has been emphasised to the point of repetitious imagery throughout the novel:

He could feel his body disappearing bit by bit into the mist.
I am a ghost (Brown, 2003: 558).

Indeed, the novel’s attitude towards physical difference in general seems, at the very least, suspicious. The two arch villains of the piece, Sir Leigh Teabing and Silas the monk, are both physically marked out from their fellow humans. Sir Leigh walks only with the aid of iron leg casings and Silas is an albino. Silas’ albinism is tellingly described in the most extreme, gothic fashion:

[T]he gun into which she was now staring was clutched in the pale hand of an enormous albino with long white hair. He looked at her with red eyes that radiated a frightening, disembodied quality. Dressed in a wool robe with a rope tie, he resembled a mediaeval cleric (Brown, 2003: 368).

Brown himself comments on the accusation of insensitivity to bodily difference in the character of Silas on his website:

It is important to remember that Silas's skin color has nothing to do with his violent nature – he is driven to violence by others' cruelty... not by anything inherent in his physiology....I truly believe the novel's portrayal of Silas is a compassionate exploration of how difficult albinism can be – especially for young people – and how cruelly societies can ostracize those of us who look different (Brown, 2006).

Despite this defence, it is impossible not to notice that negative associations of albinism are heaped unremittingly onto the character of Silas. He is literally an outcast from the world, if by choice, as a member of the Opus Dei organisation. His bodily

difference is marked in terms of fear, distortion and unnaturalness. His, truly, appears to be the mark of Cain. His is the barbaric, the instinctual, the unchecked masculine energy.

It is only through symbolic penetration of the cavity lying below the church floor, its position marked by a giant obelisk, that Silas believes he can gain access to the brotherhood's secrets. The object he uses is as crudely phallic as it is blasphemous – a candle holder from the altar:

Silas carried the heavy iron votive candle holder from the altar back towards the obelisk. The shaft would do nicely as a battering ram (Brown, 2003: 176).

As if the violent sexual imagery were not overt enough, Brown has Silas strip almost naked to complete his task:

Silas untied his cloak and slipped it off his body...Naked now, except for his loin swaddle, Silas wrapped his cloak over the end of the iron rod. Then, aiming at the centre of the floor tile, he drove the tip into it. ...He drove the pole into it again...On the third swing, the covering finally shattered, and stone shards fell into a hollow area beneath the floor. *A compartment!* (Brown, 2003: 176).

In addition to disturbing suggestions of deviant sexual behaviour deep in Silas' character (as shown in these overt images of rape), he is also associated with a very negative and repressed sexual force that is shown to be explosive and dangerous:

Before she could turn, Silas pressed the gun barrel into her spine and wrapped a powerful arm across her chest, pulling her back against his hulking body. She yelled in surprise...Holding Sophie firm, Silas dropped his hand from her chest, down to her waist, slipping it inside her deep sweater pockets, searching. He could smell the soft fragrance of her hair though his own alcohol-laced breath. 'Where is it?' he whispered (Brown, 2003: 472).

The fear of the monstrous, the grotesque, is figured here in terms of both a physical threat to Neveu's body and an implicit one to her virtue. Written very much in the style of a boy's dramatic quest, the sexual assault imagery is clear. Silas' physical difference marks him as one of the villains, just as Teabing's is a clue to his true role.

Teabing himself is cast as somewhat of a lecherous old man. He makes several lascivious sexual innuendos around Neveu and always acts with an air of deference that borders on the excessive, especially given his often-sexist assumptions about her abilities:

He hadn't meant to sound belittling, and yet Sophie Neveu was light-years out of her league. If a British Royal Historian and a Harvard Symbologist could not even identify the language – (Brown, 2003: 398).

Again, when Neveu assists in cracking one of the many codes and modestly dismisses it as “a little trick I learned at the Royal Holloway” (Brown, 2003: 422), Teabing's only response is to laughingly retort, “Glad to see those boys at the Holloway are doing their job” (Brown, 2003: 422). His reference to Neveu's innocence with regard to the true story of the Holy Grail again reveals his tasteless sense of humour:

The smile that grew on Teabing's face was almost obscene. ‘Robert, you've brought me a *virgin*?’ (Brown, 2003: 309).

Not only are there negative associations of sexual behaviour with Silas, but Teabing (the other villain of the piece), is also figured as sexist. Both men disregard the role of women, it is assumed. Thus, the simplistic binary is established, with the good men who hold and protect the symbolic female space (which is an empty signifier), and the bad men who try to invade this space forcibly, figured as symbolic rape. Deviant sexuality, as well as deviant physicality, then, seems to be a running theme amongst the villains of this piece. Not only do both occur, but it would seem that the two concepts are linked.

As we have seen, the Priory of Sion – clearly figured as the good organisation, the one in balance and harmony with natural and divine laws – practises the pagan act of Hieros Gamos, or ritualised sex between men and women. Members of Opus Dei, on the other hand, stringently deny themselves all pleasures of the flesh. Instead, they opt for practicing a form of auto-eroticised self-flagellation with a leather whip suggestively named a discipline, as well as donning a ritual cilice, or barbed thigh strap:

Kneeling on the wooden floor, Silas prayed for forgiveness. Then, stripping off his robe, he reached again for the Discipline (Brown, 2003: 229).

Since the Priory is clearly figured as good, in direct opposition to its brother organisation of Opus Dei (from whose ranks both Silas and Father Aringarosa spring), the implications are clear. Sexual union is healthy, but only if it is one condoned by the church teachings. It must, therefore, have reproductive potential, or at least symbolically so as in the Hieros Gamos ritual union between Neveu's grandfather and his wife. As we have seen, other sexual acts and other sexualities are implicitly condemned – Brown, in a move reminiscent of Atwood's Sons of Jacob strategists, banishes those othered bodies to the outskirts of both the city and the text itself. The equation is simple; certain bodies and certain acts are sanctioned, whilst others are unnatural. Those that are natural occur in people who are also morally and socially balanced individuals, worthy of the active, and thus narrative, lead.

True masculinity and femininity are, therefore, very definite concepts in Brown's novel. There is only one way to be spiritually whole, and it is achieved through one's gender and physicality; in other words, through being heterosexual, able-bodied and reproductive. No more of the concept of word over flesh, spirit over matter, this interpretation of religious doctrine places the body at the very centre of the religious world. Indeed it posits the body as the closest way one can achieve near-divinity. It is a stronger way of communicating with one's deity than through the mind or thoughts. And yet, it is a very select type of body that is allowed to do this: a healthy, reproductive body, one that is true to its gender identity, acting within the heterosexual matrix and able to be positioned without any problematic loose ends. Physical or behavioural deviation from this concept is shown to signify an inherent moral lack – a threatening flaw in the natural plan that deserves punishment.

Crypt-ology: Cracking the Female Cipher.

As I have suggested, a cursory examination of this novel might suggest strong feminist sympathies. After all, in this novel, Brown places the concept of womanhood at the centre of the plot. Mary Magdalene herself is recast as a powerful and strong woman, challenging the Patriarchal church doctrine that has placed women at the heart of original sin and bodily temptation. However, a closer examination reveals that Brown's notion of womanhood is both limited and prescriptive. In a book that

centres around solving complex conundrums, women are, literally, the answer to the riddle. Women are the mysterious cipher that needs to be cracked (or body that needs to be penetrated) for men to gain knowledge. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the word cipher can mean either a puzzle or quite literally nothing at all, an empty placeholder. This double meaning is particularly relevant when it comes to the embodiment of this idealised femininity, the literal embodiment of which is the elusively entombed corpse of Mary Magdalene, silenced in death. At every turn, though, this concept reveals its ephemeral nature, always hovering on the edge of recognition, but never materialising, never directly heard. Like the empty chalice, or the hollow 'v' of the female symbol, they are containers for information, the womb that holds the (male) secrets, the eternal mystery that can guide the way to a higher state of being, the eternal feminine.

All men in the novel seem to be obsessed with penetrating this femaleness, whether literally and sexually, or figuratively through the discovery of the tomb, in order to gain knowledge of the body of Mary Magdalene and her secret. As Marie Chauvel says, "Why is it that men simply *cannot* let the Grail rest?" (Brown, 2003: 582). The male characters are always striving to gain access to the mysterious, female secrets literally embodied in the grail – whether it be through Silas' forced entry, Teabing's impotent possessive desire, or Langdon's sensitive approach. As such, Silas' quest for textual knowledge is figured symbolically as rape, Teabing's handicapped lunge at the flying cryptex is foiled by a thought the elusive goddess voice inspires and Langdon (whose key, with the help of the women, always fits the lock) all make efforts to plumb the grail's unknown depths. In this manner, the reader is aligned with the male element. The novel itself takes the reader on a literal quest for knowledge of the sacred feminine, led by none other than Brown himself. Driven by narrative curiosity, we, like the characters, simply want to *know*.

Even at the level of reader identification, logic and curiosity (the two driving forces of this novel) are cast as male in nature, in direct opposition to a female intuitive, irrational nature. Thus the novel not only enforces simplistic physical binaries upon the reader, but also perfectly correlates these with traditional binary views on gendered behaviour. As Butler, speaking of the deceptive power of binary logic, states:

The univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are considered throughout as regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculinist and heterosexist oppression (Butler, 1999: 44).

Despite the novel's assertions of revealing the feminist principles at the heart of Christianity by restoring Mary Magdalene to her place at the heart of the Christian religion, we can read these moves in terms of much more traditional patriarchal silencing. The only importance of the chalice as cup has been through its physical contact with Jesus. Thus, the substitution of woman for cup carries with it disturbingly objectifying connotations that actively work against, rather than for, a feminist reading of this novel. Mary Magdalene is little more than a new carrying object, made holy through its contact with Christ; a silent cipher that is made to signify and upon whom (male) meaning is inscribed. Her power lies not in her self, but in what she carries.¹⁵ To read her in Butlerian terms, it is only for her supposed conformation to the social ideals of heterosexuality and fertility that she is lauded. Her powerful husband, continuation of the bloodline and ability to procreate are the basis for her esteemed position.

Justifying the novel's central concept of women as walking wombs under the guise of lauding the inherent power and naturalness of such a position, cannot disguise its deeply conservative ideological base. It would seem that this text is pre-feminist in nature, returning to old (and narrowly limited) notions of the good female body and its place in society. Women, therefore, do not escape the bounds of physicality that tie them to associations of social reproductive and heterosexual expectations. The illusion of libratory power is proffered but, ultimately, proves to be a power that only exists through women's connection with men and the normative body. This is a religion of the body, a religion for those whose bodies – and choices – happen to fit. As Butler suggests:

¹⁵ Although not the sole philosophical approach to the role of women in Ancient Greece, Aeschylus' 458BC play 'The Eumenides' represents these same beliefs, with the character of Apollo declaring, "The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts" (Aeschylus, 1953: 158).

The return to biology as the ground of a specific feminine sexuality or meaning seems to defeat the feminist premise that biology is not destiny (Butler, 1999: 39).

The novel makes numerous references to the essence of the sacred feminine. These allusions, as I have discussed, create and perpetuate the illusion of a very specific idealised femininity. They are signified at important moments in the text in which an unvoiced mysterious feminine essence seems to signal to Langdon. Significantly, these signs appear only to Langdon, the sensitive male figure who is cast as receptive to the true nature of womanhood. Neveu is not included in any of the exchanges, as women's sexuality and power without the male element threatens the basis of Brown's logic. It is, therefore, a safe, bounded female sexuality that is celebrated, one that does not threaten men's patriarchal role, but rather defines and demarcates it further by being the opposite and complimentary principle to it. As such, it is not only at the end of the novel, when the almost imperceptible sighing of an anonymous voice from the "chasms of the earth" (Brown, 2003: 493) is heard, but during the climax of the final, pressurised cryptex code-breaking in the Abby (Brown, 2003: 554). The voice that guides the way often has no words at all, working in signs, irrational imaginings, muffled whispers and images. Langdon finds his own private muse in the irrational realms of the sacred feminine when he pauses, knight-like, in his quest for the answer to the riddle (in order, naturally, to rescue the lady) to note:

The goddess was in the garden now. She was dancing in the rain, singing songs of the ages, peeking out from behind the bud-filled branches as if to remind Langdon that the fruit of knowledge was growing just beyond his reach (Brown, 2003: 550).

Singing "songs of the ages," the essential(ised) feminine is associated once again with the eternity of time and its "pre-linguistic" origin – transcending such variables as bodily or social differences (Butler, 1999: 11).

In contrast to popular perceptions of the novel, Brown ultimately does not challenge the traditional Christian views of women's worth or social place in any radical manner. He, instead, conforms to these views at every turn. Women are still primarily reproductive beings, valued for their social and physical contact with men. He merely recasts this position as a more powerful and revered one than society has otherwise

recognised, lauding this role as central to a physically and spiritually balanced life. In addition, he taps into gendered readings of behavioural attributes (associating men with logic, language and reason and women with irrationality, creativity and the visual). Brown even casts the natural world around us into a series of binary relations that reflect the classic male/female dichotomy he has established. In this way, not only does his binary reflect physical differences, but also mental and behavioural ones. In this sense, this text is perhaps one of the most conservative supposedly radical bestsellers of modern times.

In The Da Vinci Code, (hetero)sexuality is espoused as eternal, natural and complete. However, beneath this deeply satisfying discourse of coherence lies an exclusive (and exclusionary) ethos. Besides defining women solely in relation to men, the premises behind situating the uterus at the centre of womanhood are deeply reductive. Brown calls on past ways of seeing the body, but cannot ultimately provide the complete answer his argument presumes. His grand narrative proves to be an empty promise; a fragile puzzle that collapses once it is tested by any complexity and difference. Such use of specific parts of the body as the logic for understanding gender, though, finds a strong counterpart in Ensler's The Vagina Monologues.

CHAPTER THREE

The Vagina Monologues

Any analysis of The Vagina Monologues faces several problems from the outset. Firstly, its genre prompts the question of what counts as the definitive text. Secondly, even Ensler's script, one of a multitude of complex elements that the play uses to create meaning, exists in flux. Not only have there been several emendations to her original 1998 publication, but she suggests that the script be altered in certain places to more fully resonate with each individual production's cultural context (in particular, this occurs in the various "vagina fact[s]" sections, where the director is encouraged to add relevant statistics from his/her own country [Ricketts, 2006: Personal Interview]). Therefore, I had to make analytic choices over material. This analysis is ultimately based upon the most recent published script available, the 2001 V-Day edition of the play. I shall be treating this edition, in its own right, as a text. As such, I will not be covering issues of staging, editing and aesthetic choices such as costumes and programme imagery, although I acknowledge these can play an important role in the performance's construction of meaning. I must also acknowledge that, whilst criticising Ensler for her dismissal of bodies she is not drawn to, I am guilty of similar selectivity. Issues of class and race (whilst extremely salient to, and contingent upon, gender issues) are not the focus of this argument. As such, highly contentious class and race issues have been textually sidelined, often in the form of footnotes, rather than appearing in the body of the text.

The Vagina Monologues has become synonymous not only with a play, but with a movement called V-Day. V-Day aims to raise funds for organisations that combat violence against women. The rhetoric around V-day itself is multi-layered and extremely confusing. Marked by worldwide performances of the play on Valentines day, the 'V' in V-Day is said to stand for "Victory, Valentine and Vagina" (V-Day, 2004). The association of gender abuse with Valentine's Day, however, comes across as a trite marketing strategy that ultimately taints serious subject matter with blatant commercialism. Separating one aspect of the play from its intertwined context of practical activism is, therefore, extremely difficult. Criticism of the play may be interpreted as a criticism of the ethics and goals of the V-Day movement itself, which

funds a variety of community-based endeavours to end gender violence through education and outreach (Ensler, 2001: 173-4). This difficulty, however, should not preclude critical attention to the play; indeed it should heighten the need for it. Any text that is so closely connected with raising awareness of real suffering holds an even greater responsibility in its representational politics.

If, as I argue, The Vagina Monologues can be considered an example of a flawed feminist text, what are the grounds by which we should judge it? As Chris Weedon suggests, “speaking out as a woman” can only be effective if the meanings of both woman and language itself are allowed fluidity of meaning (Weedon, 1987: 82). With this in mind, I demonstrate how Ensler’s play functions to deny linguistic and gendered political change. I first argue that her overt reliance on biological femaleness and fixity of language results in a deeply exclusionary work, and one that is crucially unaware of its own constructions. Ensler’s play, while seeking to address the marginalisation and oppression the female body has experienced, ultimately reinscribes these very notions in its universal reach. Secondly, I address the issue of authority. I demonstrate that, much like Brown in the previous chapter and Atwood’s representation of the Gileadean regime in the following, Ensler actively perpetuates (and creates) an essentialised notion of the female body, whilst purporting merely to represent an obvious reality. I trace this theme in both the structure of the play and the politics of its construction. I argue that Ensler misrepresents much of her authorial process in order to disguise the fact that the voice of universal womanhood in the play is, fundamentally, her own. Further, I show that the play’s complex representational politics rest behind a facade of simplicity and uncritical engagement with the subject matter. Finally, I critique Ensler’s implied insistence on a normative body, one that functions, quite literally, to silence any-body outside of her representational framework. My reading of The Vagina Monologues will, therefore, be aimed at demonstrating the limitations of a feminism that, whilst demonstrating an awareness of, and engagement with, issues of difference, seeks to empower the female subject through what is perceived as the shared experience of the female body. As occurs in The Da Vinci Code, this problematic assumption of normative physicality ultimately reinscribes the same patterns of marginalisation and oppression that feminism was itself originally a reaction against. This once again reveals that any assumption of

normative physicality in the definition of woman ultimately hinders a feminist agenda of representation and empowerment.

Re-Embodying the (W)hole: Essentialism and Consumerism in 'The Vagina Monologues'

I have discussed the anatomical blazon in the previous chapter. Although primarily an early modern phenomenon, its philosophical assumptions underpin much of Ensler's play, not least the play's problematic representations of women.¹ Not only was the primary addressee of the anatomical blazon the part itself, but it was often urged to respond to the admirer's praises and pleas (Vickers in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 4). In time, the subject matter of the blazons was expanded to include domestic objects such as pots and benches (Vickers in Hillman and Mazzio, 1996: 6). This telling positioning, together with the fact that the blazoneurs were often simply seeking fame and monetary rewards in poetic competitions (Vickers in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 10), emphasised their consumption of women's bodies as objects. I later argue that Ensler copies this consumption with the play's own dominant anatomical eye/I. Indeed the Early Modern awareness of the part, and especially the tradition of the anatomical blazon, has direct relevance for Ensler's contemporary play. Her premise of isolating, decontextualising and celebrating a single part of the body, of conflating women with their vaginas and of urging vaginas to respond to her questions ("If your vagina could talk, what would it say?" [Ensler, 2001: 19]) all play directly into the trope of the anatomical blazon. Far from heralding any modern form of feminism, Ensler can clearly be seen to continue this problematic tradition of anatomising the female body.

Ensler's text is composed of scripted monologues interspersed by short factual interludes and question and answer style sections surrounding a central theme. This

¹ Vickers traces the term anatomical blazons to a 1539 publication by Gilles Corrozet, a "Parisian poet-bookseller" (in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 3), whose arguments against the composition of such blazons were based upon the "deification" of "the most filthy and dirty" subject matter (in Hillman and Mazzio, 1997: 5). It is interesting to note, in this regard, that much of the criticism of The Vagina Monologues follows just such a line of argument, with the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP) criticising campus endorsement of "the lewd V***** Monologues" (TFP, 2005).

structure does not reveal any overt, coherent theory about womanhood.² Ensler's central binding principle is that of the part – in this case, the vagina itself. The women characters appearing in the individual monologues are not, so to speak, fleshed out.³ Despite hints at the complexity of their lives and diversity of their backgrounds, they only speak about their experiences of their vaginas. In this manner, not only is the vagina radically divorced from its social context, but also its physical one, since the women do not mention their bodies as a whole, simply their vaginas in particular. The overwhelming focus on physicality is an overly simplistic undertaking, however, since women's experiences of their vaginas are inextricably tied to their social position, their background, their context. And yet, the character's contexts are not dealt with, except in sweeping (and stereotyped) generalisations, such as passing references to a "southern woman of color," an "English accent" or a "Bosnian refugee" (Ensler, 2001: 77, 43, 60). This is, in itself, another form of essentialism, with the effect that the identity of the character is caught between her racial and/or national identity and her body. Decontextualised, the vagina is, so to speak, stripped bare. In a text so overtly concerned with women's sexuality, nowhere is the vagina's complex relationship to womanhood or sexuality explicitly or critically explored. Despite this appearance of neutrality, however, the assumption of the vagina's centrality to any discourse of womanhood is everywhere implicit.

Widely varying aspects relating to the vagina are discussed in these monologues: aesthetic issues such as appearance, pubic hair or secretions, sexual violence, orgasms, medical examinations, menstruation, birth. Despite the array of topical issues covered, Ensler's sole reliance on the vagina as the common thread within the narrative results in several interesting conflicts. By the end of the play, we have heard from a traumatised Bosnian refugee about her experiences of rape, a homeless "southern woman of color" about her first lesbian experience, an elderly Jewish lady from Queens about her past and present memories of bodily shame, a dominatrix prostitute specialising in female clients and various other, less specifically defined

² Although the V-Day edition of the script contains the addition of several italicised sections, often critical reflections in Ensler's own voice, these do not lend themselves as easily to performance and are often omitted.

³ Despite Ensler's attempts to cast the play in a factual light, I use the term characters to refer to the subjects of the individual monologues (rather than simply women) to draw attention to their fictional quality.

characters. Whilst this careful selection of characters clearly portrays an admirable attempt at diversity, Butler reminds us of the dangers of such a method:

[i]t would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of 'women' that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity and sexuality in order to become complete (Butler, 2001: 20-1).

Sara Kelly voices the concern that, far from fostering inclusively and equality, this juxtaposition of diverse social contexts actually serves to undermine some of the more traumatic monologues:

It's hard to know, for instance, just how to respond to the tragic tale of a Bosnian rape camp survivor ("they took turns for seven days ... smelling like faeces and smoked meat, they left their dirty sperm inside me ...") when juxtaposed with a vignette about a woman who experienced her first orgasm in a hands-on tutorial called "The Vagina Workshop" ("I felt connection, calling connection as I lay there thrashing about on my little blue mat ...") (Kelly, 1998).

Despite critical reservations on Ensler's purely physical approach to speaking womanhood, Gloria Steinem's 2001 forward to the V-Day edition of The Vagina Monologues lauds Ensler's bodily focus:

[T]he value of The Vagina Monologues goes beyond purging a past full of negative attitudes. It offers a personal, grounded-in-the-body way of moving towards the future (Steinem in Ensler, 1998: xvi).

As Weedon (1999: 12) has noted, radical feminism tends to emphasise a return to the body as a profitable focus for feminist politics. However, Weedon also cautions that this notion results in the construction of a timeless female body that is made to signify womanliness (1999: 12). Steinem may celebrate The Vagina Monologues for offering a "grounded-in-the-body" approach to the future, but what kind of feminist future does it move towards? Again, crucially for the universalising implications in the text, an approach grounded in whose body?⁴ I argue that both Steinem and Ensler ultimately fail to recognise the political agenda underlying the text, simplistically believing in a natural body of common knowledge. This results in a play whose

⁴ A question I address more fully in the section "The Good Body: Heteronormativity and Physical Perfection."

politics are profoundly exclusionary and that, more worryingly, purport not to be. Again Steinem praises the play, saying:

I think readers, men as well as women, may emerge from these pages not only feeling more free within themselves – and about each other – but with alternatives to the old patriarchal dualism of feminine/masculine, body/mind and sexual/spiritual that is rooted in the division of our physical selves into ‘the part we talk about’ and ‘the part we don’t’ (Steinem in Ensler: xvi).

Do we really escape these dualisms in the play? Or are we pushed more heavily *into* them? I would emphatically argue that Ensler’s heavy normative reliance on a bodily definition of womanhood actually reinforces a binary construction of the sexes. In addition, Ensler’s insistence on a culturally acquired gender naturalises her own hegemonic construction of coherent womanhood, an effect cautioned against by De Lauretis (1987: 5).

Ensler’s rhetoric surrounding vaginas is overwhelmingly one of female completion, of essence, of identity. Actress Gillian Anderson, one of the multitudes of female celebrities endorsing Ensler, suggests that “[s]he is leading women and the world to a different consciousness of the essence of women” (Anderson in Kellaway, 2001). *The Chicago Tribune* called it “[f]rank, humorous and moving . . . a compelling rhapsody of the female essence” (Ensler, 2001: back cover). The phrase that comes up again and again in the discussion of *The Vagina Monologues*, “essence of women,” is a loaded one. It is, of course, just a small step to move from noting the critical acclaim of capturing women’s essence, to a critically scathing attack of essentialism. Indeed, the very premise of *The Vagina Monologues* – that women can be reduced to their bodies (in this case, one particular body part) – is classic essentialism. Ensler, herself, describes vaginas as “our center, our point, our motor, our dream” (Ensler, 1998: 118). Her seemingly inclusive use of “our” is a telling indicator of her extrapolations for all womanhood. Its presumed subjectivity, allowing for no differences, functions as a symbolic gatekeeper to all other(ed) bodies who do not fit with Ensler’s notion of womanhood. Indeed, Ensler’s personal philosophy on the centrality and role of women’s sexuality to subjectivity is made clear in an online interview:

Women.com: Do you think all women's power is rooted in their sexuality?
Ensler: Absolutely (Bourland, 2000).

Enslers conception of the role of the body in defining and empowering women is clearly, and repeatedly, reflected in the play. We find that the sense of identity gleaned from female physicality seems not just to define one's womanhood but one's human subjectivity as well. As one character says to his lover, "It's who you are. I need to look" (Enslers, 1998: 56). This is not an isolated monologue's stance. It occurs again and again. For instance, a character who has just rediscovered her clitoris ends with the words "*My vagina, my vagina, me*" (Enslers, 2001: 50. Italics original). Perhaps the most blatant example of essentialism, however, comes when one character begins her monologue by declaring "I love vaginas. I love women. I do not see them as separate things" (Enslers, 2001: 105). Unqualified statements such as these abound in the text. Arguably, they can be defended on the basis of their safe remove as other women's truths, other women's words. However, as I will show, this is not the case. Enslers play offers a mere masquerade of multiplicity. Any semblance of plurality is, at the very least, revealed to be filtered through Enslers voice by way of artistic ventriloquism.

When asked Enslers stock question of what her vagina would say were it able to talk, her Jewish character from Queens' answer is, "What would it say? I told you. It's not like that. It's not like a person who speaks" (Enslers, 2001: 30). Despite this being portrayed negatively, as proof the woman is out of touch with her body ("it stopped being a thing that talked a long time ago. It's closed up, under the house" [Enslers, 2001: 30]), the underlying issue is sound. Quite simply, the vagina is *not* "like a person who speaks." The synecdochal concept of voiced vaginas is reductive beyond any patriarchal biological determinist assumptions. Symbolically, giving vaginas authority to speak for women is to position them at the centre of womanhood. Surely, a more productive (and undoubtedly less reductive) aim should instead be voicing women's *experiences* of their bodies? Asking anthropomorphic questions about how one's vagina may dress itself (Enslers, 2001: 15) or what it might say (Enslers, 2001: 19) functions as a catchy literary device. Ultimately, however, it gives too much power to the body, whilst undermining the woman as a whole. In fact, granting the vagina a voice of its own, no matter how close that may be to the woman's own, simply serves to distance it even further from the woman herself – a symbolic removal rather than connection. Most problematically, however, to dis-embodiment

vagina from the woman, to quite literally give it its own voice separate from hers, is to create a discourse that places the vagina at the site of femaleness – a discourse that, while purporting to be universal, is in actuality highly exclusionary.

The Vagina Monologues has become more than just a play. Spawning a pop feminist movement, it has attracted the attention of celebrities and women's organisations worldwide. Ensler has succeeded in fashioning a consumer-friendly female body and promoting it as the natural manifestation of female sexuality. Celebrated under the collective title of "Magical Vagina Occurrences," Ensler celebrates the fact that:

A woman brings her uterus to the theatre to have me sign it...People bring and send objects – vagina products: vagina glass hand sculptures, clit lollipops, vagina puppets, vulva lamps, cone-shaped art pieces. There is a huge vagina cake in London at the V-Day party and no one can cut it. Hundreds of sophisticated partygoers eat mauve vagina cake with their hands. The clit is auctioned off and Thandie Newton buys it for two hundred pounds (Ensler, 2001: xxviii-xxix).⁵

"A lot of times women's sexuality is not celebrated. It's sold. We're taking it back" (Soucie, 2006) declared Janine Cocker, co-producer of the 2006 Ottawa benefit performance, in an online interview. Cocker's interviewer, Riva Soucie (2006), championed the symbolic use of Valentines Day ("the suckiest holiday of the year, when everybody's expected to turn into red rose-grabbing, commercial chocolate-gobbling messes") for the refreshingly topical V-day campaign. Ironically, she also reminds readers that:

If the idea of listening to the word 'cunt' enunciated 30 different ways doesn't turn your crank, perhaps a milk chocolate vagina or vulva-shaped soap does. Both will be for sale at the show. Or check out the Made-by-Men bake sale also happening in the lobby (Soucie, 2006).

As Naomi Klein, who examines the economic potential for exploiting current issues in No Logo, notes "Identity politics, as they were practised in the nineties, weren't a

⁵ Ensler's simplistic celebration of the vagina's objectified and literal consumability is telling. The disturbing association with Atwood's 1969 The Edible Woman is an ironic subtext in this regard. The Edible Woman's main character, a young woman living in a consumer-oriented world, suddenly finds herself unable to eat after becoming engaged to a young businessman. Drawing strongly on the theme of consumerism, in both its literal and figurative senses, the novel culminates with a disquieting scene of metaphoric self-annihilation. The main character bakes a cake in the shape of a woman, decorates it garishly with icing and eats it.

threat, they were a gold-mine” (Klein, 2001: 115). The same lack of textual self-awareness would seem to extend outwards to include features of performance. Although Ensler has undoubtedly successfully harnessed the power of ‘pop’ feminism, her often uncritical examination of underlying complexities has resulted in a text-inspired movement which, on many levels, is significantly flawed.

Royal Prerogative: Author-ity and the Vagina Queens

Whenever I have tried to write a monologue to serve a politically correct agenda, for example, it always fails. Note the lack of monologues about menopause or transgendered people. I tried. The Vagina Monologues is about attraction, not promotion (Ensler, 1998: xxvi-xxvii).

Although the linguistic subject is, significantly, absent from this extraordinary statement of “attraction not promotion,” my understanding is that it is Ensler’s opinion, her authorial choice that is reflected in the play. By using the passive voice to express these textual politics, Ensler linguistically hides her own agency. The effect is a dissolution of an individual authorial politics and an appeal to universal values in an attempt to make the text stand alone without an active creator. An examination of this bravely self-professed philosophy, though, immediately raises the questions of what Ensler is attracted to and, more importantly, what this attraction ends up promoting. Answers to these questions help us to understand the underlying politics of The Vagina Monologues.

As we shall see, Ensler utilises language and structure throughout the text in such a way as to suggest that her own role is marginal, that she is merely revealing true sexuality, letting it speak for itself. Recalling Butler’s theory, we note that:

[G]ender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject that may be said to pre-exist the deed...There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results (Butler, 1999: 33).

With this in mind, we see that The Vagina Monologues is the literal manifestation of Butler’s concept. Ensler ritually performs her notions of gendered normalcy, creating and simultaneously maintaining a fiction of coherent female subjectivity. However,

Enslar staunchly denies her own role as scriptwriter – both for the play itself and the gendered performance we infer from it:

I don't think I had much to do with *The Vagina Monologues*. It possessed me...I never outlined the play or consciously shaped it. As a matter of fact, the whole process was totally off the record (Enslar, 2001: xxv-xxvi).

Enslar has stated that, despite having the piece memorised, she prefers to hold cue cards in her own performances of the play. She explains the intention behind this act as follows:

Part of the reason for that is that I always wanted, anthropologically, that the women would be present in those cards, that I never wanted people to go, 'Oh, that's a performance.' I wanted them to remember that this came from real women, and the cards kind of symbolize that (Arnott, 2001).

Despite the careful assessment such strategy must have involved, she paradoxically explains:

It did not occur to me that I was actually performing The Vagina Monologues until I had been doing it for about three years. Before this point, I felt merely as if I were telling very personal stories that had been generously told to me. I felt strangely and at times fiercely, protective of these women and their stories (Enslar, 2001: xxv).

With regard to the textual complexities of authority, subjectivity and power, it is telling that Enslar overtly chooses to stage the piece as a journalistic reading or lecture, rather than a dramatic play. She prefers to claim the role of mediator over author: "I could not move when I was telling the stories. I had to remain seated in a high-back stool...I had to speak into a microphone, even in places where I could easily be heard" (Enslar, 2001: xxvi). This rigidity and lack of movement once again fuels the fantasy that the play is more factual reading than artistic endeavour. The perpetual reminder of a non-staged reality that is present in the use of the microphone once again functions to separate the play from notions of fiction and ally it more closely with notions of reported truth.

Enslar's apparently genuine belief in the simplicity of merely relating women's experiences recalls Butler's concept of "the law." Butler says that its hegemonic and

discursive power is increased by language that suggests its own naturalness and pre-discursivity:

Juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not 'show' once the juridical structure of politics has been established...In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of 'a subject before the law' in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law's own regulatory hegemony (Butler, 1999: 5).

Ensler disingenuously displaces authorial accountability and instead assumes a modest role as mere protector of, and mouthpiece for, other women's stories. She, however, has a very specific shaping role to play as author (and, in some cases, performer and director). Each monologue's character is a puppet for Ensler's views of womanhood, disembodied voices that are really just echoes of one voice – the authorial one. To deny this agency is to attempt to naturalise what is, in effect, a very heavily ideologically constructed piece, to place it in the realms of the apparently unadulterated truth about sexuality.

What, then, is the philosophy behind Ensler's play, what, exactly, does she include? There are eleven monologues in the updated V-day edition of The Vagina Monologues.⁶ There are also small intermediary "vagina fact" sections, listing answers to questions Ensler asked various women such as, "what does a vagina smell like?" (Ensler, 2001: 93), "[i]f your vagina could talk, what would it say?" (Ensler, 2001: 19) and "what would it wear?" (Ensler, 2001: 15), as well as several meditative sections by Ensler herself. Monologues in the assumed voice of a character, interspersed by facts taken from others' books, are structurally contrasted with the meditative italicised pieces. The repeated use of the word "I" in such italicised pieces explicitly demonstrates the authorial voice. Both italics and positioning, then, function to distance Ensler from the actual monologues themselves. This strategically hides her own voice and authority, reinforcing notions of the audience witnessing the revelation of a universal sexual truth rather than an individual one. Despite this appearance, careful reading of the prologues to each monologue reveal that, of the eleven monologic sections, five of them are explicitly referenced as written by Ensler for, or

⁶ Since there are several different forms of representation, I define monologues as mini-chapters devoted entirely to a vagina testimony of various characters in their own voices.

inspired by, others. Often, in the case of ‘The Flood’ (Enslar, 2001: 23-30) and ‘The Vagina Workshop’ (Enslar, 2001: 41-50), they are dedicated to the women who inspired them. It is important to bear in mind that these sections have been written *about* women, not by them. In other words, the authorial voice is unremittingly Enslar’s. In the official 2002 HBO recording of Enslar’s own performance of her play, a short message appears on the screen stating that the play was “based on interviews with over two hundred women” (HBO, 2002). The significance of the words “based on” – appearing explicitly for the first time – are no doubt more faithful to the authorial process than any explanations found in the 2001 V-Day edition.

Ultimately, the way in which the monologues are (re)presented has everything to do with Enslar’s mission. As she states:

Some of the monologues are close to verbatim interviews, some are composite interviews, and with some I just began with the seed of an interview and had a good time (Enslar, 1995: 7).

At times, even within her explanations of textual authority, there is confusion. In the preface to “The Little Cootchie Snorcher that Could” monologue Enslar states “*This monologue is one woman’s story as she told it to me,*” only to follow the statement up with the ambiguous dedication “*I wrote this piece for them*” (Enslar, 2001: 76). Another monologue is prefaced by a note saying that this one is “pretty much the way I heard it” (Enslar, 1995: 7). Whilst the qualifying “pretty much” is suggestive of a certain authorial mediation (the extent and structural nature of which, we are not told), the question lingers as to what can be said for the rest. Although Enslar admits that “the whole process was totally off the record” (Enslar, 2001: xxv), nowhere does she explicitly state how the vagina interviews that form the basis of the play were structured, and how they translated into the final text. This leaves the assumption that those monologues which are not explicitly referenced as Enslar’s own are entirely the creation of other women. However true this may be, it certainly seems unlikely that Enslar would not have altered or cut parts of the monologue in order to maximise artistic effect. Indeed Betty Dodson, the person to whom “The Vagina Workshop” (Enslar, 2001: 43) monologue was dedicated, did not even know she was represented at all:

Friends of mine who'd seen the play had alerted me that the author and sole performer, Eve Ensler, mentioned my workshops. That evening I sat in a small theater listening to a charming young woman who talked about my Bodysex Workshop in a distorted view of what I'd been doing for over 25 years (Dodson, 2001).

Dodson was horrified at what she felt to be a misrepresentation of her work, specifically at Ensler's re-naming her "Bodysex workshop" the "Vagina workshop." She felt this to be part of a misleading tradition linked to the Freudian notion of mature vaginal sexual pleasure, and that it negated women's "real source of...sexual stimulation" (Dodson, 2001) – the clitoris. Nowhere in the original piece was the clitoris mentioned. Although Ensler was receptive to her complaints – the clitoris was included as a focal point, indeed climax, of the monologue in subsequent performances and printed editions of the play – the workshop was still represented by the term "vagina." Presumably, locating the piece solely in the clitoris (as Dodson wished) would disrupt the monologue's overall coherence with the theme of the play. As Dodson commented in an interview, "Not long after that, the monologues were etched in stone and no more changes were made" (Dodson, personal communication, 2006). Of even more concern is the fact that Ensler was evidently under the impression that the original monologue was, in fact, legitimately based on an interview:

After Eve and I kissed and made up, I pointed out the fact that she never talked to me before writing the workshop monologue. Her memory was quite different. She was convinced she'd interviewed me prior to writing the monologue. We were at an impasse (Dodson, personal communication, 2006).

This blatant authorial disregard for the reality of her subject's work, combined with the fact that, in this instance, Dodson had no idea that her workshop would be represented in a play, suggests that the rest of the play bears only a loose resemblance to other women's experiences. As Dodson consoled herself, "Eve's a playwright...and this is called poetic license" (Dodson, 2001). Problematically, however, Ensler does not wish to see herself as this, indeed actively discourages the view, "I don't think I had much to do with The Vagina Monologues. It possessed me...I was taken – used by the Vagina Queens" (Ensler, 2001: xxiv-xxv). Despite such disclaimers, the fact remains: it is misleading for Ensler not to assume responsibility for her role as playwright, actor, producer, and director. Using the

disarming appeal to the magical agency and help of the “Vagina Queens” does not divest her of responsibility for her meanings.

Despite Ensler’s claim of mere representation, when asked in an interview how she did *not* like the show to be visually represented, Ensler gave a telling response:

There’s been a real discussion through the whole process of visuals, and I have really been not very strong for showing literal vaginas...Once you put a vagina there, it’s a defined thing, and your imagination then becomes stifled in a way...I think graphic, specific, literal vaginas – I don’t know, I just don’t think it works with this (Arnott, 2001).

This dislike for the inclusion of images of real vaginas and disinclination for “stifl[ing]” the imagination suggests that Ensler is concerned more with creating an ideological space than a literal one. Crucially, however, this process of construction is never explicit, thereby naturalising and strengthening Ensler’s own hegemonic discourse.

Despite claiming to have interviewed over two hundred women, there are only eleven monologues or individual voices in the play. Although five question and answer sections each contain multiple voices, they are prefaced with Ensler’s comment that “*I asked all the women I interviewed the same questions and then I picked my favorite answers*” (Ensler, 2001: 13. Original italics). Whilst this is an act of necessity in creating any coherence from such a large pool of responses, it would be naïve to assume that Ensler’s “favorite answers” have not shaped the play to reflect her own, personal interests. Problematically, however, her ensuing ideological shaping of womanhood is nowhere admitted, yet everywhere apparent:

I am always reminded how extraordinary women’s lives are, and how profound. And I am reminded how isolated women are, and how oppressed they often become in their isolation. How few people have ever told of their suffering and confusion. How much shame there is surrounding all this. How crucial it is for women to tell their stories, to share them with other people, how our survival as women depends on this dialogue (Ensler, 2001: 98. Italics original, emphasis my own).

The Vagina Monologues, then, is an assimilation of two hundred sample interviews, filtered through Ensler’s imagination, Ensler’s voice. In truth, the play is aptly named

a monologue. Monologues are single voices speaking; there is no interaction, no debate, no possibility for contextualisation. Even the acting, originally solely undertaken by Ensler, has been taken over by various women. This is meant to mimic a sense of heteroglossia that is not, in fact, present in the first text/play's conceptualisation. The voices in each monologue never interact, they state their piece then disappear. There is no discussion, they are separate, united only by a common theme – that of the vagina (in itself a problematic choice, as I have suggested). Surely a subject as contested as the vagina should be a space of continuous *dialogue* – a dialogue between social, cultural and, most of all, political institutions? It is, after all, a politicised space as much as it is a personal one.

There are moments in the text where there seem to be glimmers of a dialogue occurring, if only of Ensler questioning herself. One section in particular seems to deal with this issue directly. In an italicised section after a monologue on a prostitute describing how she enjoys making women lose control, she adds the following:

After I finished this piece I read it to the woman on whose interview I'd based it. She didn't feel it really had anything to do with her. She loved the piece, mind you, but she didn't see herself in it. She felt...that I was still somehow objectifying them [vaginas]. Even the moans were a way of objectifying the vagina, cutting it off from the rest of the vagina, the rest of the woman...So I interviewed her again (Ensler, 1995: 113-4).

Here, we find the only explicit example of a dialogic moment in the text, an acknowledgment of another voice, a give and take of representative power. This is the only time where input from another woman is explicitly referenced as inspiring Ensler to change her text. Even then, the original piece the interviewee found fault with remains in its unadulterated state, prior to the addition. The dialogic nature of the section is made even more explicit by the use of italics to further separate the women's voice from Ensler's authorial comments. However, this section ends in Ensler's own conclusions, and is never repeated, with a simple return to the (often problematic) interview method as a solution.

Bearing in mind the complex politics of representation, the major remaining issue at stake in the text is whose voices Ensler claims to represent under the guise of universal womanhood. More importantly, whose voices does she actively silence?

The Good Body:⁷ Heteronormativity and Physical Perfection

Enslers text centres on celebrating the concept of a natural, body-based female sexuality. Anything that complicates this simplistic equation is, therefore, significantly disruptive to the meaning of the text. In Enslers reading of the female body, the vagina is used as the sole uniting factor in the play, cutting across social and cultural differences. This marginalises other bodies and results in deeply problematic exclusions.

Although Enslers never explicitly passes comment on her definition of woman, The Vagina Monologues is located around a specific type of female experience in a very specific type of body. Regardless of this fact, however, it claims to represent all women. Enslers speaks of “[h]ow crucial it is for women to tell their stories, to share them with other people” and that “our survival as women depends on this dialogue” (Enslers, 2001: 98. Italics original). Despite the irony of Enslers obvious awareness of difference, of other bodies, she unapologetically measures womanhood in purely physical normative terms, constructing what is in effect, an extremely specific female body. For example, as one of the (con)textually disembodied voices (voices that Enslers paradoxically invests in being all-body) explains about her first menstruation, “Looked down and there it was. I’m a woman” (Enslers, 2001: 39). Under the quasi-supernatural heading of “Vagina Occurrences,” Enslers disingenuously states that “a drag queen performs TVM on closing night” (Enslers, 2001: xxx). It is difficult to imagine how Enslers can fail to interrogate the complexity of subjectivity, positioning and meaning that this event creates.

In this supposedly all-embracing view of womanhood, what kind of women are challenging to this view of femininity? Clearly, the answer lies with bodies that complicate the physical boundaries of womanhood, bodies where femininity evades being placed at a specific site, where a list of parts does not necessarily add up to the whole body. Despite the racial diversity and unflinching confrontation of many uncomfortable social issues such as homelessness, prostitution and rape, there are

⁷ ‘The Good Body’ is the title of Enslers 2004 play and book adaptation (Villard, New York). Sharing the same basic interview structure as The Vagina Monologues, it broadly investigates the dangers of idealised female beauty and destructive notions of unattainable physical perfection.

only echoes of bodies that are not physically mainstream, physically perfect. Though the bodies of the Jewish woman who has undergone a hysterectomy (“The Flood,” [Enslar, 2001: 25-30]) and the Bosnian woman who has been raped and mutilated (“My Vagina was my Village” [Enslar, 2001: 61-63]) arguably fulfill these criteria, they are both examples of bodies that have undergone physical changes from normalcy and, therefore, do not challenge the naturalness of the category itself. Even then, these contextual issues are not dealt with in any depth in the text, as they do not fit with the central issue of the text: vaginas.

Despite an unequivocal aim of enabling women to talk about their bodies, to give them representational space (Enslar, 2001: xxxi), Enslar’s play has instead limited the representational space open to women by locating womanhood within such rigidly articulated, physical bounds. Examples of bodily othering so shocking that it is astonishing they were published under a feminist heading are littered throughout the text. For instance, one monologue portrays a woman’s horror at the prospect that her body may not, in fact, fit into the standard conception of female normalcy:

I was, in fact, terrified that I did not have a clitoris, terrified that I was one of those constitutionally incapable, one of those frigid, dead, shut-down, dry, apricot-tasting, bitter – oh my God (Enslar, 2001: 48).

We are invited to empathise with the woman in her hysteria, as well as find the situation slightly absurd and funny (the punchline to the monologue comes with the woman’s cry, “I’ve lost my clitoris. It’s gone. I shouldn’t have worn it swimming” [Enslar, 2001: 49]). Enslar offers us the notion that “[w]hen people are laughing, they process things in ways they’re not conscious of” (Grossman, 2000). Problematically, what is being processed in this monologue is not only a sense of compassion at the childlike terror the woman expresses, but also the imposition of an unconscious standard of normalcy regarding bodies and sexuality. Above all, however, we are invited to share in the woman’s joy at her discovery of her body; that she does, in fact, have a clitoris and she can achieve orgasm through her own agency. Although we are encouraged to identify and empathise with the woman, the resolution of her achieving orgasmic potential and discovering that her body is normal after all is tellingly simplistic. Left hanging is the unresolved, but pressing, question of ‘what of those who aren’t?’ Her terror has been abated by the happy discovery (and performativity)

of her sexuality. Any other ending would question the fundamental premise of the text – that bodily normalcy rests at the centre of natural female sexuality.

The fact remains, though, that for millions of women, this is not the case. What of those who are unable to achieve orgasm? What of those who do not have clitorises? The only representation here is the presentation of a horror, a horror that, beneath our identities, we could be one of them. The othered body is not only marginalised, it is hystericised, overtly layered with connotation of being one of those bodies, those “frigid, dead, shut-down, apricot-tasting, bitter” women (Enslar, 2001: 48). If such a description had appeared in the context of a newspaper or magazine article, it would quite possibly classify as hate speech. Certainly, it would be considered politically incorrect, intolerant and disrespectful. That Enslar can simultaneously refer empathetically to the horrors of female genital mutilation as a crime against women and then explicitly refer to their “frigid, dead, shut-down, dry, apricot tasting, bitter” bodies is astoundingly, almost unforgivably, incongruent. No matter whether this monologue is in a different voice, chosen to represent a different female fear (thus ostensibly placing it at a safe remove from Enslar’s own opinion), its construction of female sexual subjectivity is alarming in the extreme. This is worsened by the fact that the dramatic monologue structure of the play results in her statements never being qualified or contested.

The manner in which the character in question is comforted by the workshop facilitator is also telling:

She told me my clitoris was not something I could lose. It was me, the essence of me. It was both the doorbell to my house and the house itself. I didn’t have to *find* it. I had to *be* it (Enslar, 2001: 49. Italics original).

To “be” one’s body is a concept that, even prior to the first wave of feminism, women have fought actively against. As Butler reminds us:

The return to biology as the ground of a specific feminine sexuality or meaning seems to defeat the feminist premise that biology is not destiny (Butler, 1999: 39)

Being both “doorbell to my house and the house itself” again implies that sexuality equates with identity in such a way that the person is not complete without a normative body. The unintentional metaphor of homelessness, though, is a fitting one for those for whom there is literally no room in the text.

The Vagina Monologues is intended to be a vehicle for a frank discussion of womanhood. The fact that this discussion is centred on the vagina demonstrates Ensler’s belief in it as a common-sense physical female identifier. At first appraisal, what could be more female, more non-negotiable than the vagina? However, besides the many millions of pre-operative transsexuals and intersexual people who may wish to be included as women despite their lack of vaginas, there are many cases of women who simply do not have vaginas. After certain hysterectomy operations, it is considered necessary to remove from a third to almost the entire of the vagina – a process known as vaginectomy (Cancer Research UK, 2004). Many women have misshapen or deformed vaginas, and there is a condition, known as Mayer-Rotikansky-Kuster-Hauser Syndrome (MRKH), where women, though chromosomally and otherwise physically normative, are born completely without both vagina and uterus. This condition occurs in approximately one in every five thousand live female births (Hammersmith Hospital Trust, 2006). Indeed, even positioning post-operative transsexuals in relation to the text is problematic. Though in possession of a vagina, the apparent sexual naturalness Ensler celebrates in the text through focussing on the naturally normative body at the expense of a more inclusive notion of womanhood, also functions to marginalise those who can only attain this status through bodily modification. All of this begs the question, in The Vagina Monologues, as in life, where do these bodies fit?

Robert Stoller’s 1968 Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity medically documents many cases of intersexuality. Although himself working within the binary sex/gender system he helped to identify, Stoller’s conclusions do much to question this notion.⁸ As he significantly declared, “I think there is clinical evidence that the sense of being female and even feeling feminine...is independent of the female genitalia” (Stoller, 1968: 55). Also:

⁸ The term ‘sex/gender system’ was first coined by Gayle Rubin (Rubin, 1975: 168).

Just as little boys, in whom the presence of a penis greatly augments the sense of maleness but is not a *sine qua non*, little girls without vaginas develop an unquestioned sense of femaleness...even in [the vagina's] absence in the neuter (XO) child, a feminine gender identity develops if the infant is unquestioningly assigned to the female sex (Stoller, 1968:58).

Stoller also suggests that the intersexed body does much to challenge the simplistic binary of male/female, sympathetically noting that “He [the intersexed person] is in that peculiar position of agreeing with all the world that there are, as it says, only two sexes, while he belongs to neither” (Stoller, 1968: 34).

Interestingly, there is a section that is devoted to a woman with MRKH, though her condition is never named as such, in the later V-Day edition of The Vagina Monologues. The paragraph in question occurs in a contextual, authorially reflective section, where Ensler affirms how important it is for women to speak their suffering, dispel their shame and tell their own stories. Using the authorial I, it is often cut from performances, since its composition does not fit with the dramatic engagement of the actual monologues.⁹ Found directly before the paragraph on the woman with MRKH is a piece concerning a woman whose father rejected her because of a childhood injury to her vagina. This introduction of exploring how men judge women by their vaginas, on keeping them intact and normal, does not set a positive tone for the reception and understanding of the woman who does not have a vagina at all. Immediately following the excerpt is a paragraph on one woman's passionate argument for the description of the true texture of the vagina, as well as a celebratory reflection on the word “cunt” (Ensler, 2001: 100). It is between these radically different motifs that we find the small paragraph documenting how a woman who was born without a vagina is supported by her father only in her quest to get one. Nowhere does this challenge the notion that the vagina is at the centre of femaleness that, without it, one is not fully a woman.

The “story” of the woman without a vagina is written in italics, as opposed to the plain typeface of the actual monologues (Ensler, 2001: 99). It is in a chapter together with two other women's stories, as opposed to all the other, standard typeface

⁹ The 2002 official HBO DVD of the play, as performed by Ensler herself, cut this section of the text, as did both the 2004 and 2006 productions of the play I attended in Cape Town, South Africa.

chapters, which deal with only one woman's story at a time. Indeed, the last woman's story in the italicised section is actually expanded on and given a piece "inspired by" her (though written, of course, by Ensler). The Oklahoma woman with MRKH is not granted her own "vagina interview," as the others are. Instead, her story is told for her by Ensler who does not attempt to adopt her subject's voice as in the monologues, an indication of the tangible *lack* of subjectivity available to this woman who does not have a vagina.

We are introduced to the woman in question as the "stunning young woman from Oklahoma" (Ensler, 2001: 99). Nowhere else does Ensler feel the need to make aesthetic physical comments on her subjects. It would seem that Ensler finds that, since she does not have a vagina, there is nothing to represent her by in the paradigm of this play. Both structurally and symbolically, she is no-thing. Ensler, therefore, describes her as "stunning," as if it is important to affirm her feminine attractiveness in the face of such a de-feminising lack in order to give her back a sense of her womanhood.

Significantly, the only emotions represented in the short piece are the young woman's father's. His is also the only voice given direct representational space. In a text where voice is explicitly linked to the vagina ("if your vagina could speak, what would it say?" [Ensler, 2001: 19]) she, quite literally, has no voice, no space. We hear that "Her father was heartbroken" and doesn't want his daughter to "feel bad" (Ensler, 2001: 99). What has he lost? What has she? This complex issue is not dealt with at all, we are only told by the end of the paragraph that she is happy and "well-adjusted" (Ensler, 2001: 100). The term "well-adjusted" not only raises the question of what socio-sexual transformation has happened in the process of this physical transformation, but also what it implies about her marginal position before the surgery. Butler's conception of the law is once again relevant in this regard, since assimilation into this system of seeing and understanding her body, and thus herself, has occurred. In his authority to talk of and about his daughter's body, the father's "noble attempt to comfort her" simply re-affirms the woman's structural isolation from her own body. By the end of this extract, the only thing we know of this woman is that she is a "stunning young woman from Oklahoma" who doesn't have a vagina, but who is "getting one," and is happy and "well adjusted" enough to come and see

the play with her stepmother (Ensler, 2001: 99-100). Issues of what her response might be, should be, where she fits in (both within the schema of the play and socially in general), are not dealt with. The marginality of her social position is reflected in her marginal position within Ensler's text.

The entire extract is written like a fairy tale, as we hear about the woman's quest for "the best homemade pussy in America" (Ensler, 2001: 99), helped in her journey by the heroic and brave man who functions as the woman's voice.¹⁰ This sense of fictitious suspension of reality is furthered with the comforting third-person narration so reminiscent of the voice of mythic wisdom in children's tales, "and they did get her a new pussy, and she was relaxed and happy" (Ensler, 2001: 100). One almost expects the line 'and the girl and her new pussy lived happily ever after.' Through representing this experience in the timelessness of myth, as opposed to the harshness of reality, the audience/reader is lulled into a comfortable, distanced past. They are not forced to confront the implications of the situation for the play's gender dichotomy. Where is the woman herself in this? Not only is she unvoiced, but she is also unfeeling. The most we are told about her personal state of mind is that, by the end, she is "relaxed and happy." Conveniently unvoiced, she is no longer a threat – either to the play's, or society's, gendered premises. As Foucault reminds us, "There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (Foucault, 1976: 27). Ensler's discourse, then, is as fundamentally shaped by what she does *not* say, as much as what she does.

With this in mind, Ensler's resolution of the extract with, "the love between them melted me" (Ensler, 2001: 100) can be considered both a weak conclusion and an injustice to her subject matter. Nothing is said about the woman herself, her experience of her sexuality, her body's story. Ensler both denies her a voice and sublimates her to her father's emotional experience of her body. Instead of dealing with the women's body-story (the premise of the play itself), Ensler concentrates on the "heart warming relationship" between father and daughter. This safely accommodates her radically marginal female body into the familiar rhetoric of

¹⁰ It is interesting to compare this "vagina fairy story" with that of *The Little Mermaid*, whose own quest to normalise her body (i.e., become penetrable) necessitated her *loss* of voice. As she thinks to herself, "Oh, I would so like him to know that I, just to be with him [the prince], have given my voice away for ever and ever!" (Anderson, 1962: 52).

patriarchy and authoring it into a consumer-friendly non-identity. Ultimately, Ensler has perpetuated just the kind of silencing strategy that her play is a reaction against – all in an effort to smooth over and deny the voice that, quite literally, does not fit. Whilst she has made space for various revisions, additions or alterations based on audience feedback, the best she can do in this case is to allot a mere nineteen lines (none of which are in the woman’s own words) as a token gesture to something she does not want to acknowledge – that not all women have vaginas. In this way, the trope of rendering unsanctioned women’s sexuality is never contested; a woman without a clitoris or a vagina is never given a symbolic Ensler voice to tell her story. Only normative bodies are allowed (the semblance of) speech.

Hall argues that, far from disrupting the physically normative premises of the play, it is this very inclusion of the intersexed body that allows Ensler to further naturalise her construction of natural female sexuality:

Ultimately, the visibility of the vagina as the center and ground of female identity is made possible by the *visibility* (not the invisibility) of the intersexed woman’s story. In *The Vagina Monologues* the woman from Oklahoma who was born without a vagina is visible as an exception, an alternative to the general rule that women have vaginas...In fact, ‘abnormal’ bodies reveal what ‘normal’ bodies are and how they should function (Hall, 2005: 108).

Notably, the quest to get the Oklahoma woman’s body normalised is accepted unquestioningly by Ensler. In this regard, it is interesting to compare the furiously outraged manner in which Ensler speaks about genital cutting of the clitoris, terming it “mutilation” (Ensler, 2001: 67), and the offhand acceptance she uses when speaking about surgically altering a woman’s body by “getting her the best homemade pussy in America” (Ensler, 2001: 99). Some changes, it would seem, are more acceptable than others. For every shocking “vagina fact” mini-chapter we are provided with about the helplessness of the girl undergoing female genital mutilation, her lack of choice and the social pressures driving her into a situation where her body is altered forever, there could be one mentioning the same practices that occur in western culture with so-called corrective surgeries (Hall [2005: 106] agrees).¹¹ The Vagina Monologues is

¹¹ This is, of course, not to link the two concepts unproblematically. Whilst some women undergoing FGM are voluntary participants, wanting their bodies to fit with their cultures patriarchal standard of normativity, there are many who are violently forced into this practice by those close to them. Much of the motivating heteronormative concepts of social pressures, however, are relevant to both issues.

very definitely the product of a white, Western mind, and it cannot see past this outlook to be critical of many of the practices of its own culture. Quick to point out the vaginal/gender atrocities occurring elsewhere, its gaze is not turned inward.¹²

Esther Morris, a woman born with MRKH, wrote back to Ensler's representation of the condition in the play, entitling her article 'The Monologue of the Missing Vagina.' In this online piece, she criticises Ensler's (and society's) uncritical approach to physical difference as "the price we pay for society's lack of creative thinking." She concludes:

We alter women's bodies when attitudes need adjusting. Different is not wrong. Different is different...Identity shouldn't be centred around body parts; missing, constructed, or removed (Morris, 2000).

This obsession with body parts continues deeper and deeper into the text to the point of being reductive, particularly an obsession with functioning body parts, parts that behave themselves. As such, Ensler appears to make an implied correlation between physical and emotional health. This seems to be a central, if unconscious, premise of her play, and occurs at the very level of linguistics. Many times she speaks of The Vagina Monologues as a process of birthing, pregnancy or fertility. For instance "V-day was conceived" (Ensler, 1998: 129) and again, on reclaiming the word "cunt," "[s]he needed to help me reconceive it" (Ensler, 1998: 100). Conversely, and perhaps more worryingly, though, we have the explicit association of violence against women with infertility:

When you rape, beat, maim, mutilate, burn, bury and terrorise women, you destroy the essential life energy on the planet. You force what is meant to be open, trusting, nurturing, creative and alive to be *bent, infertile and broken* (Ensler, 2001: xxxii. Italics my own).

Although it is common to use metaphors of birth to describe a process of, often literary, creation, surely a play explicitly undertaking to represent womanhood calls

¹² The 'Little Cootchie Snorcher that Could' monologue has also been criticised for its incongruities, since its portrayal of what is ultimately drunken, statutory rape ("the alcohol has gone to my head and I'm loose and ready" [Ensler, 2001: 81]) is treated lightly, indeed celebrated. The infamous words "if it was rape, it was a good rape" were deleted by Ensler in 1999 from the original version of the monologue, and the child's age raised from thirteen to sixteen, after it sparked public outrage (McElroy, 2000).

for more linguistic sensitivity than Ensler displays in such word choice? Despite abundant examples of extreme political correctness, perhaps this case requires some sensitivity or qualification. For not all women can conceive. The fact that Ensler chooses to end the play with a monologue on birth structurally speaks to this problematic conception, as it were, of motherhood being the pinnacle of womanhood.

The rhetoric of physicality, of completion can clearly be seen underlying the text. There is no escaping from the underlying message – healthy women have functioning vaginas; the creative principal, whether it be applied to a play or a pregnancy, is a healthy, wondrous event to be celebrated. The play's premise, therefore, reveals an unquestioned and simplistic belief in natural sex. As Butler notes:

The category of sex is...inevitably regulative, and any analysis which makes that category presuppositional uncritically extends and further legitimates that regulative strategy as a power/knowledge regime (Butler, 1999: 122).

Ensler's rhetoric, therefore, perpetuates notions of normative physicality as central to sexual identification.

"I've done other things. I love the dog shows. I sell antiques" (Ensler, 1995: 29), says one of the characters on her sexuality after undergoing a hysterectomy. This is supposed to be a funny yet poignant moment, a demonstration of how empty her life is. Is this because of her emotional disconnection to her body, or because part of her body has been, literally, disconnected from her? The answer is unclear. In the context of Ensler's deeper body politics surrounding physical normalcy (as demonstrated, for instance, by her portrayal of the woman with MRKH) it does ring slightly false. The portrayal of this woman who has lost her life, her essence as well as her body comes all too close to the "frigid, dead, shut-down, dry, apricot-tasting, bitter – oh my God" (Ensler, 2001: 48) women who are described earlier. Indeed, the similarity is striking. Since the monologue is titled "The Flood," we are paradoxically encouraged to see her as "dry" and literally "shut-down" ("Down there? I haven't been down there since 1953" [Ensler, 2001: 25]). The character's metaphor for her vagina as the closed-up "cellar down there" (Ensler, 2001: 25) is extended to once again affirm notions of physical normativity when she says:

it's part of the house, but you don't see or think about it. It has to be there, though, 'cause every house need a cellar. Otherwise the bedroom would be in the basement (Enslar, 2001: 26).

The implication – that every woman needs a vagina, that it “has to be there” – perpetuates these highly problematic and exclusionary notions of biological womanhood.

Again, it seems like Enslar opts out of a difficult area with the final two lines of this monologue, “You know...I feel a little better” (Enslar, 2001: 30). Up till then, she has presented us with a veneer of humour covering what is a very uncomfortable area (notably, in the other[ed] monologue of the Bosnian rape victim, this is not the case). This is aided by the fact that Enslar stipulates before the monologue itself that the woman should be portrayed as “Jewish, from Queens” – a recognisably popular stereotype that functions to aid performative humour. Notably, Christian white women's racial identity is never stipulated, presumably suggesting we see normative womanhood as being white and middle class. hooks (hooks, 1981: 137) calls attention to the same tactic of presumed whiteness Enslar utilises, suggesting that, in a text that purports to represent all woman, it is imposing racist and classist notions as the norm. Again, it is interesting to see how racial otherness is only bestowed on the pieces that make for uncomfortable reading/viewing (the Bosnian rape victim, the Vietnamese child who is injured, the “Southern woman of color” who is homeless and seduced by an older woman, and the Jewish woman's hysterectomy). Certain things, it would seem, are easier to speak about than others. Perhaps the comfortable geographical and racial remove allows Enslar to speak more freely around the issue than in the case of universal bodily abnormalities. Hall has commented on the “colonialist” impulses that appropriate otherness whilst reinscribing normativity at work within the play (Hall, 2005: 103), suggesting that:

The normativity of ‘western,’ ‘American’ and ‘white’ is secured, not disrupted, by their ability to appropriate nondominant difference. Similarly, the narrative force of *The Vagina Monologues* is the ability of the normative vagina to appropriate different women's experiences and yet still produce the same story of the ‘normal’ female body as a body with a vagina (Hall, 2005: 108).

When one voice takes over the representation of womanhood, some people are unavoidably left out. Unsurprisingly, the Intersex Society of America has issued an online protest to The Vagina Monologues, registering common distress at the alienation they felt from the type of womanhood Ensler promotes, from the subjectivity that they are excluded from. As Emi Koyama, the Program Assistant for Intersex Society of North America explains:

Many of us intersex people and our friends, family members, and allies went to see the play in the past, and came out upset, hurt, angry, and/or in tears, walking through a crowd of women talking to each other about how empowered they felt. We did not feel empowered. We felt invalidated and silenced. We felt invisible, as it presented horror stories about genital mutilations occurring only in other continents, as if we do not experience them here (Intersex Society of America, 2002).

In a play of this nature, it is easy for nuance to get lost. But with only token gestures towards the issues that she is accused of ignoring, or misrepresenting, Ensler has ridden roughshod over anything she is not attracted to, and created a play that has taken off from under her to evolve into a movement. As the Intersex society's manifesto states:

V-Day, which produces *The Vagina Monologues* at approximately 500 schools across the country, is not just a performance or a cultural phenomenon, but is a political movement. As such, we feel that it needs to be held accountable for damages it causes (Intersex Society of America, 2002).

The "damage it causes" is not, however, limited to its imposition of a physical normativity on bodies. Although Ensler is bisexual, her representation of lesbians is complex and contestable. Four of the eleven V-Day edition monologues represent lesbian relationships, yet of those four we encounter a dominatrix prostitute, a drunken seduction of a minor by an older woman and an explicit, titillating account of lesbian sex. Notably, Ensler herself expresses discomfort at these accounts, inserting her own thoughts into the character's monologue, "I realize I am embarrassed, listening to her" (Ensler, 2001: 116).¹³ This is the only example of Ensler explicitly critiquing any of her monologues. Her qualified embarrassment, together with the fact that her words are placed, once again, in a different typeface than the monologue,

¹³ The word 'own' is used in a relative sense, to the extent that any of the play's words can be seen as not being her own.

functions to curiously distance her from the displays of lesbianism she describes. Arguably, it is Ensler's embarrassment that is the focus of the monologue itself. The italicised (and, by inference from the previous structural layout of the text, marginal) sections are given to the character, Ensler reserving the standard, plain typeface for her own reflections. In an atypical moment of textual critique, she states "I am worried about the titillation factor, worried about the piece becoming exploitative" (Ensler, 2002: 116). Notably, this fear is not present in the heterosexual monologues. Indeed, the choice of highly sensationalised monologues portraying lesbianism serve to represent homosexuality as socially shocking or radical – a sexuality which is placed in direct comparison to the less confrontational monologues dedicated to heterosexual relationships.

Despite attempts at inclusivity, Ensler's work is a clear product of the heterosexual matrix, reflecting a curiously heterosexist bias. Her notion of the vagina as the centre of the person, the locus of identity (indeed, even identity itself) relates back to Butler's notion that sex is often seen as being "the person" (Butler, 1999: 23). This is problematic, not only because of its location in a constructed universal female body, but because of its simplistic association of sex with gender, of the body with the identity. Sexuality has become vagicentric, placing focus on a specific type of body as much as it does on a specific type of (penetrative) sexuality.

In the "vagina fairy tale" of the woman born without a vagina, we see that the father comforts his daughter with the words:

'Don't worry, darlin.' This is all gonna be just fine. As a matter of fact, it's gonna be great. We're gonna get you the best homemade pussy in America. And when you meet your husband, he's gonna know we had it made specially for him' (Ensler, 2001: 99-100).

The understanding of a woman's vagina existing exclusively and explicitly for a man's use is one of the more blatantly patriarchal, traditional assumptions that pepper Ensler's text. It is, further, evidently sanctioned and approved by Ensler, who figures this as a positive, climactic and satisfying ending to the dilemma. It is important for the woman to "get" a vagina, so she can have a husband who can own it – it will not

be made for her, but rather for her “devastated father,” and, in time, her husband. As Hall also notes:

[T]he fact that the ‘discovery’ of the missing vagina was made during play with a girlfriend is never discussed in the text. Instead, Ensler, the doctor, and the father all assume (and ultimately enforce) the fourteen-year-old girl’s heterosexuality...Perhaps Ensler is simply representing the story as it was conveyed to her; however, Ensler could have made more observations than she did at the end of the story (Hall, 2005: 103-4).

Continued protest and action, particularly from the intersex community, has resulted in a greater sensitivity towards the problematic representations of womanhood in the play. Informative brochures on intersex conditions have been distributed at certain North American performances, and portions of the profits donated to relevant charities (Hall, 2005: 106). Hall, however, critiques these gestures of inclusivity on the grounds that the problem lies at a much deeper level:

I don’t think the problem...is only a problem of the invisibility of intersex experience, which can be adequately addressed by the addition of intersex monologues or by the distribution of information about intersex genital mutilation at performances. Rather, the absence of any intersex experiences is an effect of the gendered bodily norms operating in Ensler’s text (Hall, 2005: 107).

The Vagina Monologues makes a concerted feminist attempt at reacting to negative or restricting representations of the female body and dispelling women’s genital shame. Ultimately, however, the play’s insistence on claiming power through a sense of collective (bodily) subjectivity means that it unintentionally reinscribes repressive, heterosexist, patriarchal and normative notions of the female body. In an attempt to speak for womanhood, Ensler has created a play that is blind to its own contradictions.

I move now to my analysis of Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, which I place in direct opposition to both Ensler’s and Brown’s evocations of gender and which provides a non-regulative and more mutable representation of female embodiment.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Handmaid's Tale

Set in an alternate 1990's America, Atwood presents in The Handmaid's Tale an alien world where women are treated like commodities, rewarded according to their social status and reproductive capabilities and controlled utterly by the male state. The similarities between Gilead and Western society are chilling, in a work of what Atwood terms "speculative fiction" (Michael, 1996: 135). Atwood plays with these notions of cultural similarity throughout the novel. As Magali Michael (1996: 135) suggests, this very "proximity of the novel...eliminates any sense of temporal displacement and effectively prevents the 'suspension of disbelief' that most works of speculative fiction require." The Handmaid's Tale is so striking because, at base level, it is true, or one step from being so. As Atwood states, "There's not a single detail in the book that does not have a corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical fact" (in Freibert, all in McCombs, 1993: 284). Gilead is an autocratic Da Vinci Code world of forced norms, where women are the "sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1996: 176) needing protection. Unlike the Brown bestseller, however, they are not even given the semblance of religious power.

With a rich web of cultural allusions, The Handmaid's Tale functions on multiple interpretative levels. My reading of the novel will place the poststructuralist concept of culturally and historically produced sex and gender at the heart of this narrative – a reading supported by Atwood's own deconstructive critical approach. Indeed, everything about the novel speaks to the questioning of the natural; it is a multi-layered exercise in deconstruction of the gendered subject. Through her own construction of the society of Gilead, Atwood demonstrates the minutia of societal control and production, especially as it pertains to gendered and class norms. This results in a relentless exposé and critique of restrictive, fixed binary logic. Atwood's textual play with the concept of bodily role in the creation of gender identity explores notions that lie at the heart of current feminist concerns. Her narrative appears to take a strong poststructuralist stance on such issues. As Atwood herself states:

I'm very suspicious of anything beginning with a capital letter, like Man. Or Woman. Or the Novel. I seem to think from the ground up, rather than from the top down...As for Woman, capital W, we got stuck with that for centuries. Eternal woman. But really, 'Woman' is the sum total of women. It doesn't exist apart from that, except as an abstracted idea (in Hancock, all in Ingersoll ed, 1992: 201).

Therefore, I examine Atwood's treatment of the category of Woman in the light of poststructuralist deconstruction, suggesting that, far from a theoretical impossibility, the call for a self-conscious and critically aware use of such a term is a distinct possibility. I demonstrate how Atwood utilises all elements at her textual disposal to concurrently represent and unsettle essentialist notions of womanhood. In particular, I laud her meticulous deconstruction of the multiple and problematic traditions whereby the female body is read as a delineation of female identity. Through such analysis, I aim to make a strong case for the value of the poststructuralist awareness in the representation of gender that I find to be exhibited in the novel.

I argue that the novel's protagonist, Offred, manages to find a position from within patriarchal discourse to both reveal and disrupt repressive gendered meanings. Atwood's writing strategies enable multiple emancipations – just as Offred escapes the restrictive and regulatory system of Gilead, Atwood breaks free of the confines of the textual politics (and, indeed, the novel genre itself) by refusing conventional representational strategies. As such, I will demonstrate that Gilead, far from being a distant dystopia, has relevance for socially regulative notions of gender today. In the section below, 'Class Counts: Why Women Can Never Be One,' I argue that Atwood explodes the myth of a singular, coherent womanhood by stressing the differences between women. Playing with the notions of class and race to further complicate identity politics, she critically replicates much of the second wave of feminism's engagement with difference. I demonstrate that, in Gilead, class and racial oppression is such that different women may have little or no common experience at a gendered level, despite the centrality of gender to their experiences.

My following section, 'Sexed Slaves: Exploring the restrictions of Hand-Made Identity,' examines the construction and positioning of the female body in Gilead. I show that the notion of woman, already demonstrated to be multiple in terms of experiences of class and race, is further deconstructed at a physical level. I argue that,

through Gilead's extreme example of biology as destiny, Atwood is able to undermine the physically normative premise underlying gendered identity formation.

Finally, in 'A World in Words: Narrative Games and the Profit of Play' I analyse the novel's layered narrative techniques in terms of their implication for a feminist reading. Far from falling back on the term woman as "a preconceived idea to which reality must correspond" (Wittgenstein in Heyes, 2000: 95), Atwood's highly self-aware prose draws attention to the term's ellipses and constructions. Atwood's mutable use of language and its resonance on multiple levels of meaning provide the representational space needed for a subjectivity that does not rely on a single, solid identity. I will ultimately argue that Atwood's narrative approach in The Handmaid's Tale provides a workable and inclusive answer to the representational impasse that has been left by poststructuralist deconstruction.

Class Counts: Why Women Can Never Be One

Atwood stresses that there is nothing simplistic about the patriarchal oppression of Gilead. Despite the clear-cut, oppressive laws put in place to regulate society, she demonstrates that, in reality, there are no binary divisions to be made between men and women at either a biological or an emotional level. In "highlight[ing] all that binary logic hides or veils, all that lies in between the two rigidly demarcated sides of any given dichotomy" (Michael, 1996: 146), Atwood draws attention to the complexity of experience. She demonstrates that this complexity is always regulated and controlled through the construction of artificial binary logic in language.

In the Gileadean system, different women are responsible for different elements of the traditional female roles of domesticity and reproduction – a pun on the implications of 'the division of labour.' In this separation, the classical liberal feminist idea of the split between the body and the mind, between sex and soul (Weedon, 1999: 101), is, quite literally, embodied. Atwood's critique of this divisive approach is clear – all women are shown to be entrapped within the limiting roles that define them. Such rigidity of identification and definition, Atwood suggests, is a highly oppressive and deeply unsatisfactory route to take.

Such clearly artificial distinctions of gender roles demonstrate that, in Gilead, one woman's experience of her gender may be entirely different from another's. There is no singular commonality of female experience that can be isolated as natural. Indeed, it is the oppression of class that often outweighs that of gender. In Gilead, there are different levels of womanhood, each with their own status and duties. The Wives are afforded the most privilege and have power over the treatment of the Handmaids. Wives are followed by the Aunts, who have the power to control their Handmaid students. The Marthas, lowly domestic workers within the home, still enjoy more freedoms than Handmaids. The Handmaids themselves are one step up from the Econowives (who are considered of a lower class since they have to fulfil all the functions of the other groups at once). Lastly, there are the Unwomen, who occupy the lowest possible position and who are worked to death in hazardous radioactive wastelands (Atwood, 1996: 260). All Gileadean women operate within stringently patriarchal discourses of use. As such, only female bodies which are able to work towards state ends are recognised as women. Such state sanctioned labour, however, is highly gendered. As such, although the unwomen are literally worked to death, they perform hard, man-ual labour, something which is seen to negate their identity as women. Significantly, women can aspire to no social ascension within this system; it is only possible to fall to the category of unwomen – a fear which haunts all of the women in the text (Michael, 1996: 139). As such, we see that each category of women is pitted against the others. Small rewards in each group maintain the jealousy that sustains the system. In order to conquer women in their entirety, jealousy-inspired division is a necessity. In this regard, one is reminded of hooks' argument surrounding racial inequality (mentioned in chapter one) that stated, given the opportunity for a higher social position, women will oppress women:

One might predict that were white women's equality achieved, they might retain an investment in the continued exploitation and oppression of other non-hegemonic groups (hooks, 1984: 15, 18).

As Rita, a Martha within the Commander's household, observes, "In this house, we all envy each other something" (Atwood, 1996: 57). Even the Marthas consider themselves above both the Handmaid's and the Unwoman, as the exchange between Rita and Cora concerning Rita's condemnation of the Handmaids choices demonstrates:

Anyways, what could you do, supposing?
Go to the colonies, Rita said. They have the choice.
With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all? Said Cora.
Catch you (Atwood, 1985: 20).

Their conversation demonstrates both a sense of superiority over the Handmaids and strongly felt notions of aberrance for abnormality, as represented by the Unwomen and reflecting the power of Gilead's social construction. Noticeably, the prospect of sharing company with the Unwomen takes syntactical precedence in Cora's incredulous final response. Positioned before the idea of starving to death as the direst option, it reveals the underlying idea of contamination, both social and physical, by association with the unnatural. Infertility is seen as both sin and disease, as divine punishment and sufficient reason for social exclusion. I will return to this topic in greater detail in the following section.

When the narrator chants spiteful slogans in the school with real rancour, she finds within herself a bloodlust that both surprises and shocks her:

Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby.
We meant it, which is the bad part.
I used to think well of myself, I didn't then (Atwood, 1999: 82).

As Michael states:

Binary logic not only structures the hierarchical opposition between victimizer and victim but also assures that victims will collude with the system if they are allowed to occupy the position of victimizer, even if only temporarily and in highly orchestrated settings (Michael, 1996: 141).

Of course, there could be nothing more orchestrated than these ceremonies and rituals, all of which are specifically designed to safely channel the Handmaid's anger away from the Gileadean system itself. The desire for the feminist dream of the sisterhood is summarily quashed when Serena Joy rejects the narrator, who contemplates this state of affairs: "I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me" (Atwood, 1996: 25-6). The narrator seems, however, to be torn between empathetic understanding for Serena Joy ("which

of us is it worse for, her or me?" [Atwood, 1996: 106]) and moments of powerful gloating at the one thing she has that Serena Joy does not – her fertility:

Even at her [Serena Joy's] age she still feels the same urge to wreath herself in flowers. No use for you, I think, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore, you're withered (Atwood, 1996: 91).

Atwood is clear; valuing absolutes over indeterminacy and constructing meanings as fixed and directly oppositional will unavoidably create power struggles for the higher position. There is no possibility of a common sisterhood when women are divided by oppression and difference. Once again, the reader is pointed towards the concept that any overarching feminism depends on a stable subject, making it fundamentally flawed.

Atwood suggests that men also suffer under this rigid system, though often in different ways. The less powerful younger men are at the mercy of the handmaid's subtle taunting. Even their sexual urges are policed by their elders:

As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach...I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there (Atwood, 1996: 32).

For the most part, the Commander is portrayed as considerate of the situation, yet entrapped by it just the same. We, therefore, see that patriarchy entraps and oppresses all, not just the women. The Commander so longs for human intimacy, an expression of individuality outside the official bounds, that he is willing to risk his life for a game of Scrabble. After all, his identity is set within prescribed bounds, too. Michael (1996: 153) agrees, suggesting, "On one level, the Commander's desire for intimacy demonstrates that he himself wants to be recognised as a subject."

Gilead's power is heavily reliant on the divisive hypothesis amongst women, utilising the fragmentation of women along class lines to pit them against one another. By splitting loyalties in this manner, they ensure that no coherent resistance can be mounted (Michael, 1996: 140). Atwood demonstrates that this concept of divide and conquer works so well because, simply, the term woman is already multiple. In this

manner, Atwood pays homage to the complexities of the second wave arguments of non-representivity and to critics who helped to expand the awareness of feminism's overwhelmingly exclusionary focus. Far from being one homogenous category of women, we actually find that women in positions of power are hierarchically closer to men than those who are doubly oppressed by their gender and social standing. Women of the highest social rank (achieved, significantly, only through their marriage with men of status) can, therefore, be deemed honorary men. In this regard, the irony of Serena Joy's limping reliance on a phallic walking stick speaks for itself (Atwood, 1996: 56). Additionally, although the Aunts are not allowed guns, they are assigned electric cattle prods, described in graphically sexualised terms as substitute phalluses which are "slung on thongs from their leather belts" (Atwood, 1996: 14). Like hooks, Atwood suggests that where there is power – significantly conceived of as phallic in nature – to be gained within an oppressive system, it will be seized at the expense of others, regardless of the supposed loyalty ties of gender. In this manner, she deconstructs the centrality of gender as a means for identification, focussing instead of the specifics of oppression.

Identification within – and discrimination between – different groups of women functions on both a narrative and stylistic level. As we have seen, each demarcated group of women is pitted against the others, and individual women compete within groups for the status of success (defined purely for the Handmaids as a healthy pregnancy and the Wives as possessing a healthily pregnant Handmaid). At a meta-textual level, however, readers are drawn in by the first person narrative of the Handmaid as well as strategies such as the use of othering (words such as "us" describe the Handmaids as contrasted to "them" for all other women). This leads the reader to have specific, and telling, responses to each of the different categories of women. For instance, although we are encouraged to pity Wives like Serena Joy in the indignity of their position, we are also encouraged to dislike them, rather identifying with the narrator. This narrative strategy of reader-identification, therefore, demonstrates, at a level intimately connected to the readers themselves, how systems of power function to include and exclude people. Lest we become too comfortable in the narrative positioning, however, Atwood ends the Gileadean narrative without a stable resolution, abruptly switching time, location and narrator with the inclusion of an 'Historical Notes' coda. This functions to destroy the singular narrative perspective

by denying any coherent sense of textual understanding or positioning, further destabilising the politics of knowledge and identity.

To varying degrees, then, anyone who is not white, upper class, fertile or male in Gilead becomes marginalised, often radically so. Race would seem to be the most extreme cause for deportation – there are no black people of either gender in this society. However, the narrative's focus on the high-status Commander's household sends the working class Econowives' experience to the margins of the story, to be noticed only at intervals in the text (and then only in passing). In many ways we are reminded of issues of non-mainstream class and race by their omission.

It would be a mistake, however, to see Atwood as critically unaware of the complexities of race, class and sexuality. Her sidelining of the Econowives and casual mentioning of the “resettlement of the Children of Ham” (Atwood, 1996: 93) is no guilty omission, no oversight.¹ Instead, it serves a powerful rhetorical function, with Atwood's occasional, casual mention of their presence concurrently reminding the reader of the limitations of singular narrative experience and the complexities of oppression. The resulting strategic parody of the dynamics of representational power that have historically oppressed those very groups provokes a chilling realisation of the ease of becoming swept up in a discourse, forgetting about the complexities of experience. As Foucault reminds us, “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault, 1978: 27). Perhaps the most alarming thought is the complete omission of any knowledge about the situation for any other group; where have black people been deported to? What additional atrocities might the Econowives be forced to endure? We simply do not know. A parody of the early feminist concern with only white, middle class experiences, the novel resigns women of other races and classes to the margins of the text, as they have been in feminist histories for the greater part of its representational history. We are, once again, shown that there can be no overarching, female experience; there are many other stories left untold that may well be vastly different to that which we currently hear.

¹ Friedman (2001: 109) notes that “[s]ome commentators read the story of the flood and its aftermath and saw a divinely ordained ‘stain’ on the black body, which originally had been white. Calling this moral taint the Curse of Ham, after one of Noah's sons, these interpreters of God made a connection between blackness and hypersexuality.”

Just as Gilead takes the criticisms often leveled at North America to extremes – that it serves only white, middle and upper class male interests – the post-Gilead Canada is a dramatic contrast. Offhand comments about “the Canada of that time” (Atwood, 1996: 323) and the “former State of Utah” (Atwood, 1996: 317) bring the awareness that there has been a definite power shift in the relations between Canada and her powerful neighbour America. As such, the historical notes and conference transcription at the end of the Handmaid’s narrative play wittily with the notion of marginalisation once more. Races that were once sidelined (notably Native Americans) are now at the center of discourse, with whiteness qualifying as the exotic other. The conference chair, her name a combination of the western ‘Maryann’ and the Native American ‘Crescent Moon,’ is head of Caucasian Anthropology at the University of Denay, Nunavit (itself clearly loaded with the telling linguistic reflections of the phrase “deny none of it” [Brooks Bouson, 1993: 155]). This separation of “Caucasians” from other races to the extent that they now require their own department (as opposed to being the default perspective), plays with notions of the conscious separation of women’s studies and African-American studies courses. Such disciplines would not be necessary if everything else did not so strongly favour other discourses. These narrative ploys “suggest a multicultural future in which the power of white patriarchy has been successfully challenged” (Brooks Bouson, 1993: 155). However, as Davison notes:

Although the existence of a Department of Caucasian Anthropology reverses the usual hierarchies – who is studied, who studies – there still *are* such hierarchies and the institutions that embody them (in VanSpanckeren and Castro, 1988: 119).

Rubenstein (in VanSpanckeren and Castro, 1988: 111-2) references the use of natural imagery in the academic coda at the end of the novel, noting that the conference participators “bear names...with associations with nature” as well as offering fellow participants the opportunity of a joint fishing expedition and Nature walk. Rubenstein places this in direct contrast to the Handmaid’s consciously inverted use of natural imagery to convey a sense of social dis-ease, reading this as a parody of the primary narrative. However, it is made clear that the society of the 2195 symposium has more than a slight correlation to that of Gilead. Whilst hiding behind the facade of the

natural, the society is just as socially indoctrinated by cultural power struggles as before.

The symposium is, at surface, all-too recognisable in its seemingly gentle jab at academia. However, the power dynamics of the symposium's last word suggests this liberal stance is merely a surface appearance and that, ultimately, very little divisive underlying ideology has changed. Indeed critics have gone so far as to suggest that it is in post-Gileadean culture that we should look for the most disturbing elements of gender oppression. Foley (in Brooks Bouson, 1993: 157) notes, "Although ostensibly a scene from the distant future, [the symposium] is actually the book's clearest depiction of a worrisome present." Whilst the alien and brutal tactics of the Gilead regime were easily deconstructed, this culture (and by logical extension, Atwood suggests, our own) has retained the seeds of its thinking, expressing this ideology in a far more subtly naturalised, and thus worrying, manner. "In crucial ways," cautions Davison, "the epilogue is the most pessimistic part of the book" (in VanSpanckeren and Castro, 1988: 120).

Sexed Slaves: Exploring the Restrictions of Hand-Made Identity.

Although, as we have seen, Atwood meticulously highlights the complexities of oppression in Gilead, gender is clearly the basis for the most examined form of social marginalisation. A very self-conscious critique of our body-based society, Gilead is a world where the notion of survival of the fittest is taken to absurd new limits and an obsession with the concept of normalcy is pervasive. Indeed, Gilead is instantly recognisable to the Western reader – a society that, distressingly, is alien only on account of its brutality. Women in Gilead have small degrees of power according to their social status, but are mainly judged according to their biology.

The Handmaid training school is one of the foremost means of such gendered indoctrination in Gilead. Organised according to a warped family structure, it is run by women named Aunts. The Handmaid-narrator remarks that the Aunts are "in love with either/or" (Atwood, 1996: 18), and we clearly see that state structures such as this school inculcate future Handmaid's with the type of binary ideology surrounding gendered identity that Gilead is based on. Of course, Atwood's suggestively familiar

naming of this institution as “the school” and incorporation of various children’s educational structures such as the afternoon nap throws both its differences from, but most importantly its similarities to, contemporary Western society into sharp relief. Together with the replacement of written with pictorial signs, this emphasises the infantilisation of the women who are now deemed to deserve less-than-adult status.

The concept of the school is a literalisation of the manner in which we learn our identities as gendered subjects, and functions as yet another reminder of the similarities between Gilead and our own society. Indeed, a startling correlation to the rhetoric of Gilead is to be found in this extract on women’s gender role acquisition:

Feminine bodily discipline has this dual character: on the one hand, no-one is marched off for electrolysis at gunpoint, nor can we fail to appreciate the initiative and ingenuity displayed by countless women in an attempt to master the rituals of beauty. Nevertheless, in so far as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a ‘subjected and practiced,’ an inferiorised, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers (Bartky, 1988: 75 in McNay, 33).

Clearly, whilst Gilead *does* “march people off at gunpoint” for transgressions against their prescribed gender, it is only a step removed from our own “oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination” aimed at producing women who are “the docile and complaint companions of men.” This correlation prompts the reader’s sober realisation that it is only at narrative level that it is easy to see the constructions of the curriculum and their resulting, indeed resounding, implications for womanhood. Atwood is extremely clear that these schools are shaping a highly artificial entity, whilst still calling into question the concept of any form of natural female identity. Indeed, certain key concepts of poststructuralist feminism are, quite literally, embodied by various characters throughout the narrative. Such a reading reveals rich depths of insight on matters of gender and subjectivity. Butler’s law, a structure that dictates societal norms and both produces and normalises the production of gendered meaning, can be applied with ease to all aspects of the state’s structured workings. Gilead’s autocracy is, however, more of a monolithic and structured entity

structured entity than Butler's conception, and breaking this law has room for only one sentence – death.

Through a process of threatening regulation, Gileadean society inculcates the necessity of women remaining wholly in their bodies, of being nothing but a fully functioning, reproductive body. Where this is no longer possible, as is the case for the Wives, Aunts and Marthas, the body remains a cause for anxiety. It must then function either as an instrument for work, or as a negated object that can only achieve wholeness through association and identification with a fertile body. As the narrator laments:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will...There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping (Atwood, 1996: 83-4).

Whilst Gileadean gender roles vary, the body is unequivocally seen as the epitome of the person, signalling a return to the concept of pervasive sex that women such as Wollstonecraft (in Dent, 1929: 4) critiqued in the past. Through Gilead's extreme example of biology as destiny, Atwood sends a strong message that resorting to the body as static site and definition of femininity is, ultimately, a regressive and dangerously exclusionary option.

In the case of the Handmaids, the only power to be gained is through negation, by hurting their one bargaining commodity – their bodies. The only power the body has is the power to cease to be. As the narrator notes:

It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge (Atwood, 1996: 18).

In the case of Serena Joy, however, it is difficult for her to have a voice and space, since her body is no longer functioning according to the Gileadean ideal, "I wonder how she [Serena Joy] manages to get herself noticed. I think it must be hard" (Atwood, 1996: 76). The body, is seen as a source of potential trouble, a constant war

is being waged against it, “we would talk, about...all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to” (Atwood, 1996: 20).

Interestingly, though fertility is prized, the male body is largely exempted from the terms of such a physical war. The possibility of male infertility is never admitted, since “[i]t’s only women who can’t, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective” (Atwood, 1996: 214-5). Only women can be guilty of the crime of infertility in Gilead. For a crime it is – a crime against the State and a crime against womanhood that is punishable by deportation or death. Whilst all bodies limit and define the self, women’s definitions are narrower. This imbalance between male and female bodily meaning, however, emphasises Atwood’s poststructuralist exposure of the artificiality of classificatory systems. As Michael (1996: 145) comments, “[t]hat biology determines women’s and not men’s lives indicates that biology is a source of oppression only if manipulated as such,” again speaking to Atwood’s interrogation of structures of power and knowledge.

Physicality in Gilead is, therefore, an entrapping and all-consuming entity in its rigidity of permissible bounds, no matter what status the person holds. Through this commonality of experience, Atwood effaces the artificial Gileadean definitions of social ranking that are taken on by both men and women. Whilst oppression may be experienced differently by different groups, it never escapes the base difference at the heart of Gilead – physicality. The body, whilst experienced differently, nevertheless radically defines the self at a fundamental, existential level.

Of course, the obsessive question of bodily normalcy is always based around a definition of what is not normal. As Butler comments:

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject...This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life (Butler, 1993: 3).

In Gilead, we find an almost perfect correlation between Butler's "abject beings" who inhabit a "zone of uninhabitability" and the Unwomen who are banished to the colonies. Atwood's questioning of the construction of normalcy demonstrates that concepts of the natural are always based in ideological contexts. In Gilead, this has created a pervasive fear of not fitting with the normative, reproductive body. As the narrator notes, "who knows where they go? You don't see that many old women around any more" (Atwood, 1996: 162). Gilead's response to the question of physical deviation from its ideal is swift and sharp: deportation or death. Ultimately, these very often mean the same thing – deportees to the colonies are sent to ecologically dangerous places, where life expectancy is set at three to four years (Atwood, 1996: 260). In Gilead, difference, quite simply, means death.

Once declared an Unwoman for refusing (or being unable) to take on the destined role of a proper woman, options are severely limited. In this regard, Butler's comment that the gender misfit unavoidably becomes the social misfit (Butler, 1999: 23) is again cruelly, and extremely, demonstrated. This can be seen in the colonies, in the men's salvagings (where male state traitors are ceremonially killed by the Handmaids) and in other punishments meted out to any who do not conform to Gilead's strictly policed gendered norms. Positioned between the cracks of the Gileadean patriarchal discourse, the Unwomen are perceived as either physical aberrations or gender freaks. As such, they are doomed to a life of pure physicality until their body – the original problematic entity – gives out.

In this patriarchal, capitalist system, universal claims about what it is to be a woman are irrevocably made. All women who do not conform to these standards are denied subjectivity. Here, members of the high-ranking patriarchy have claimed the god-given right of naming and taken it upon themselves to cast out those who do not conform. The stable – and comparatively safe – sense of identity that is offered, no matter how negating, is, therefore, a much-sought-after acquisition, with women such as the Handmaid Janine quite literally giving her self up to attain it. As the Handmaid-narrator comments, "people will do anything rather than admit their lives have no meaning...no plot" (Atwood, 1996: 227). For those who fall outside the patriarchal regime's handful of identity positions, though, there is no possibility for comfort. "I think of the others, those without," says the narrator again (Atwood, 1996: 75) and

we, too, are forced to pause and ruminate on life as an undefined entity. The fact that the narrator's "without" is not qualified; that it is – often like the condemned women themselves – left hanging, opens it to all manner of potential endings. The reader is, once again, prompted to fill in the ellipses and ask what exactly these women are without. Without womb? Without child? Life? Gender? The possibilities are endless, and yet endlessly negating. Even the Unwomen's name is the essence of erasure – they are defined solely, and paradoxically, by what they are not. Since little positive is prefixed with 'un,' the word Unwoman also garners linguistic suggestions of being undone, unclean, unnatural, and so on. It is also a clear reference to the Indian notion of the untouchables – the lowest possible caste for karmic reincarnation and, thus, the most shunned class of people. Significantly, these Unwomen are seen only in representational form, rendered invisible except for the specific purpose of instilling horror in the grainy propaganda documentaries where, with the movie sound turned down, they are, quite literally, silenced. Taken out of circulation, they represent the "fuzziness at the edges" (Moi, 1999: 40) of sexed meaning which Moi finds so inconvenient (see chapter one).²

The Handmaids are encouraged to think of each other as sisters, striving towards a common goal; sisters, the narrator qualifies, that are "dipped in blood" (Atwood, 1985: 19). However, this sororial bond does not extend to the type of familial emotions the name suggests. Although bonded in suffering, the Gileadean system prevents meaningful connections between the Handmaids, not only by forbidding any but the most basic stock verbal exchanges, but by ensuring that all women are pitted, bodily, against each other. As such, there is a raging jealousy for those Handmaids whose bodies have succeeded in proving their womanhood and earning their keep:

One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved (Atwood, 1996: 36).

² Indeed, Moi's choice to dismiss any physicality which does not fit with her notion of womanhood as an exception to the rule bears damning resemblance to Gilead's official policy of rendering such bodies, for all intents and purposes, silent and invisible.

This proves to be highly divisive amongst the other Handmaids, with the narrator sensing that Janine relishes displaying the proof of her pregnancy to other women. The system of oppressive competition can, therefore, translate into danger for those who appear to have succeeded:

Now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security. Jealousy could get her, it's happened before. All children are wanted now, but not by everyone (Atwood, 1996: 36).

The women of Gilead are complicit in a system that values them in only one way – as reproductive vessels. They are, therefore, trapped in a narrowly defined group purpose that binds them together with a collective goal, even as it separates them. This results in situations such as the curiously complex bonding of the Handmaids at the birth ceremony. At these emotionally fraught events, they are trained to chant themselves out of their individuation into complicity and identification with the woman giving birth. During the charged ceremony that the narrator describes, many of them experience physical empathy pains with Janine; breasts leak false milk, stomachs contract (Atwood, 1996: 134). In this manner, Atwood demonstrates that the indoctrination of the mind can be strong enough to manifest at the level of the body by mimicking the natural. By blurring the lines between biological act and constructed social fiction, Atwood suggests the bounds of these experiences are not as demarcated as one might suppose. This, again, deconstructs any Western sense of natural sexual identity.

Despite the collective catharsis that this ceremony provides, however, women are still pitted desperately against one another, body against body, womb against womb. When the ceremony is over, they come to realise this and are reminded of the fact that, in actuality, it symbolises their own personal failure:

My breasts are painful, they're leaking a little. Fake milk, it happens this way with some of us...we ache. Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What confronts us, now the excitement's over, is our own failure (Atwood, 1996: 137).

The Gileadean narrator's scorn for women who buy into the system is clear. Harshly critical of Janine, whom she believes has become the perfect Handmaid, the narrator criticises her for transforming into an unthinking woman-womb:

And Janine, up in her room, what does she do? Sits with the taste of sugar still in her mouth, licking her lips. Stares out of the window. Breathes in and out. Caresses her swollen breasts. Thinks of nothing (Atwood, 1996: 125).

There is, however, more than a hint of jealousy in this condemnation; the scenario is, after all, only a projection on the narrator's part. Echoes of this same sense of disgust for women who have bought into the system can be seen in Wollstonecraft's declaration that women who pose no challenge to their expected role of passivity are "weak beings...only fit for a seraglio!" (Wollstonecraft in Dent, 1929: 6). Once again, Atwood demonstrates that, regardless of time and place, women themselves have always been divided along the lines of what constitutes correct gender identification.

Janine is initially presented as one of the most successful examples of complete ideological conversion. In an early passage dealing with school life, she begins a traumatised confession of her earlier life. Recounting her experiences of rape, she recants her role as victim to adopt a more Gileadean sense of female blame. This process can be read in the light of Foucault's theories on Western "confessional sexuality," where the confessor gets pleasure precisely out of the act of speaking of the transgression to others:

The confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex...it gradually lost its ritualistic and exclusive location; it spread, it has been employed in a whole series of relationships: children and parents, students and educators, delinquents and experts (Foucault, 1978: 63).

In the Gileadean Handmaid school, we find a return to the "ritualistic and exclusive location" of Foucault's Christian confessional past. Nowhere else are women encouraged to voice their sexual confession, and in no other manner. Significantly, this highly dramatic (and carefully orchestrated) moment in the text incorporates all of Foucault's participant categories: Janine is at once the child, student and delinquent:

Last week, Janine burst into tears. Aunt Helena made her kneel at the front of the classroom, hands behind her back, where we could all see her, her red face and dripping nose (Atwood, 1996: 82).

By her final, correct confession, however, (or, her understanding and operation of the Gileadean discourse) she is lifted to the status of “an example” (Atwood, 1996: 82). This demonstration of her desire to please the regime culminates in her later role as sacrificial victim of the new order. Unlike our Handmaid narrator, Janine’s only escape is to retreat into the world of madness, significantly returning to the past in order to escape her present.

Notably, whilst the Gileadean men we encounter tend to be passive, mildly benevolent, if indoctrinated and often sympathetic (one thinks of Nick’s risky attempts to save the narrator, or the Commander’s polite yet ignorant attitude), women are ultimately revealed to be the most violently oppressive of other women. Although not powerful in the broader patriarchal system, they are often revealed to be the enforcers, the teachers, the primary oppressors. Aunt Lydia pleads beseechingly “[d]on’t think it’s easy for me either” (Atwood, 1996: 65), but nevertheless relentlessly instills the system’s values in her protégés:

She said ‘Think of yourselves as seeds,’ and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial (Atwood, 1996: 28).

The only people who are allowed some leeway within this body-based system of identity are those whose social position situates them in a different sphere of Gileadean female use. The Wives, the workers and the whores are just such a trio of women. They are, respectively, responsible for legitimating the status of the Handmaid, inculcating gender ideology or domesticating the households, and fulfilling the officially outlawed sexual fantasies of the Commanders. As such, they are certainly less tied to their reproductive potential than the Handmaids. However, none of these groups escape the all-consuming physicality that is the basis of their identity; it merely affects them in differing ways. The Wives, for instance, are constantly reminded of their physical failings by the unspoken “reproach” implied by the Handmaids’ presence (Atwood, 1996: 23). Continually reminded of their pervasively insufficient sexuality, they are socially judged according to the successes of their Handmaid surrogate selves. As such, every symbolic effort is made to merge

the two women into one holistic entity. This can particularly be seen in the humiliating ceremonial sex acts, where the Handmaid lies on the pubis of the Wife to signify that they are “one flesh” (Atwood, 1996: 104).

The women at Jezebels, though ostensibly outside the Gileadean system, are also heavily reliant on, and enslaved to, their bodies. Their lives depend on their ability to perform sexually upon demand, they are entirely defined by a (hetero)sexuality that may or may not be their own. Here, too, the concern of failing is ever-present. As Moira says, the women at Jezebels only have “three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard” (Atwood, 1996: 261). Once again, the female body is put at the service of men, since at Jezebels, we see that “the ‘forbidden’ is accommodated, but only to serve traditional assumptions about male, not female, sexuality” (Rubenstein in VanSpanckeren and Castro, 1988: 111). Marthas, too, are reliant on their aging bodies to perform the household chores. Here, the role of women as domestic workers is explored, as their position is only secure whilst they are still strong and able to perform their own duties:

The Marthas don't want to be forced to retire, because who knows where they'd go?...I remember Cora, earlier in the spring, staggering around even though she had the flu, holding onto doorframes when she thought no-one was looking, being careful not to cough. A slight cold, she said when Serena Joy asked her (Atwood, 1006: 162-3).

“[P]erhaps...the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all,” says Butler (1999: 11) and it would seem Atwood agrees. After all, the process of relying on biological definitions of what constitutes a woman is harshly critiqued. Gilead is the ultimate example of a society that makes universal claims about what it means to be a woman, about who does and does not belong. Above all else, the cruel example of the Unwomen forces recognition of the dangers of rigidly defining what constitutes a woman, powerfully questioning the relationship between social and intrinsic meaning. In The Handmaid's Tale, essentialism is, quite literally, a dangerous practice. In this manner, Atwood's text can be read as a demonstration of Butler's notion that, since there is no sex outside of the sexed action, the concept of sex is a mere fantasy of boundary-drawing designed to benefit specific people. The artificiality of bodily functions underlying the designation of Gileadean womanhood, and the interests this definition serves, are made very apparent.

A World in Words: Narrative Games and the Profit of Play.

The Handmaid's Tale can be read as a demonstration of the manner in which discourse is central to the formation of subjectivity and meaning. Atwood takes the poststructuralist stance that language is not merely a reflection of any social reality, but an active shaper of it too, repeatedly referring to its embedded ideological and regulative powers. Indeed, the theocracy of Gilead specifically demonstrates the Butlerian notion of language creating and perpetuating gender norms. Further it reveals the issue of language's centrality to subjectivity, by illustrating the way discourse shapes selfhood. The state construction of (particularly female) identity is based on a ritualised collection of textual knowledge and an attempt to naturalise its own constructions by exercising its discursive power.

Slowly acquiring a sense of one's status as gendered subject is rendered impractical in Gilead. Instead, the idea of learning is literalised, with schools set up to promote the swift engendering of women for a limited range of social positions. However, these schools do not teach the conventional literacy associated with acquiring an education. Instead, they expressly inculcate gendered ideology and a sense of (state-sanctioned) subjectivity. Central to this task of engendering is the use of language. Since language is so closely tied to subjectivity and the Handmaids' identity is meant to be effaced by their physicality, reading and writing are strictly forbidden. Denied access to any words other than the word of God (selectively chosen by their Commanders or teachers), and instructed in rote responses for every situation, they are isolated from any discourse other than the one chosen for them. As our Handmaid narrator comments, "I have nothing to write with, and writing is, in any case, forbidden" (Atwood, 1996: 43). The Aunts make the phallic power of the pen oppressively apparent, "'pen is envy' say the aunts" (Atwood: 1996, 196). This sense of a negative full circle in women's rights has ironic and pessimistic implications for the direction of a society based entirely on enforcement of a normative female identity.

It comes as no surprise that in Gilead, language is an important key, both to revealing the ideology behind systems of power and providing a means of resistance. Brooks Bouson (1993: 136) notes that "*The Handmaid's Tale* uses a narrative strategy designed to call attention to the acts of reading and interpretation," and, indeed, it is in

the realm of language that the textual politics of the novel are particularly complex and self-reflexive. Atwood manages to use language to represent experience whilst at the same time drawing attention to the limits, elisions and power dynamics within it. The largest portion of the narrative is recounted by the first person narration of the Handmaid Offred, whose use of language can be seen as a concerted effort to define and assert her own subjectivity against the discourse of a system that constructs her as its object:

Offred...is faced with what is surely the most radical, fundamental, existential challenge. Her problem is not how to survive in the theocratic dictatorship of Gilead, but how to *be* – as a human being, as a woman (Grace in Nicholson, 1994: 196).

Following Atwood's emphasis on indeterminacy and the fluidity of identity, however, this desired subjectivity is never coherently achieved, nor is she wholly subjected to the oppressive Gileadean system of identity:

The novel disrupts the classical opposition between subject and object by depicting Offred as occupying both and neither position simultaneously...her identity is fluid, in process rather than fixed and stable (Michael, 1996: 153).

In the context of Gilead's social organisation, the deceptively mundane choice of Scrabble as a form of interaction between the Commander and the narrator is revealed to be a radically subversive game. Not only does the narrator hold the letters, achieving the tangibility of physical contact she so desperately craves in combination with the thrill of the written word, but she has the power to make her own meaning of them, arrange them as she will: "I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it" (Atwood, 1996: 149). Significantly, the game enables her words to intertwine with his; they share letters to construct meanings that go well beyond the limits of the game.³ As their words weave in and out of each other's, the seductiveness of linguistic transgression enables a connection far more intimate than the customary physical one they endure. The resonance is profound. Additionally, her words speak in camouflaged protest against the oppression she is under: "*Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*" (Atwood, 1996: 149). Though language is literally and

³ Grace (in Nicholson, 1994: 196-8) agrees with this point.

metaphorically a tangible possession of the patriarchy, she is able to re-work it to highlight her own elided identity. She silently voices her protest by choosing a word specifically related to voice (“larynx”), fertility and female bodily ripeness (“quince”), reproduction (“zygote”) and disguise (“valance”). The latter association can be made since a valance is a decorative fringe of material originally made popular in Victorian times for concealing what were considered to be the overtly sexual legs of tables, pianos or, suggestively, beds (Websters, 1996: 746). In combination with the choice of “ripeness,” the Handmaid-narrator’s use of “quince” is reminiscent of the Biblical phrase “the fruit of the womb” (Psalm 127.3). The ancient Greeks believed the quince to be a symbol of fertility, holding them sacred to Aphrodite, the goddess of love (Rieger, 2006). In this light, the narrator’s references to the dual discourses of clinical biology (“zygote”) and religion significantly combine the two discourses that Gilead uses to define her. Her use of them, however, manages to be subversive in its implied protest. The metaphor for the potential within feminist discourse is apparent: although the language we hold is patriarchal in origin and function, possibilities exist for a rearrangement of the terms. The pieces can be laid down in such a way that they disrupt the seeming coherence of meaning and draw attention to subtexts of oppression and marginalisation. The Handmaid thus shows her recognition of the disruptive power inherent in language by her own word play, both with the Commander in scrabble, and in her narrative ruminations to us.

The household’s previous Handmaid’s use of the mock-Latin phrase “nolite te bastardes carborundorum” to communicate her secretive message to her successor is also telling (Atwood, 1996: 62). Symbolically the realm of the educated male elite, Latin is almost universally referred to as a dead language because of its impracticality in day-to-day communication. Therefore, the now-dead woman’s appropriation of it is all the more transgressive. Not only is she defying state-imposed female illiteracy, but she is laying claim to a tradition of male power (though with disturbing connotations of death being the only possible freedom – either linguistically or physically – that she can rebelliously achieve). The fact that it is revealed to be schoolboy’s Latin, an ungrammatical joke (Atwood, 1996: 196), not only points to a certain playfulness with language, but also a deliberate refusal (in the creation of the word “carborundorum”) to play by the traditional rules of high discourse, even as she uses it. This highlights the Butlerian argument for the possibilities of working within

the terms of the law in order to challenge its authority (Butler, 1999: 34). Significantly, when the narrator initially discovers the scratched phrase, it is the words themselves rather than the meaning (which she does not understand) that give her comfort. At the point in the ceremony where the Commander calls for the household to pray, she instead silently repeats the Latin phrase, thinking, "I don't know what it means, but it sounds right, and it will have to do, because I don't know what else I can say to God" (Atwood, 1996: 101). Significantly, she feels it is only this re-appropriated phrase that gives her personal power with God, and all that he implies as the ultimate patriarchal father figure of "the law." It is, therefore, the defiant and creative *use* of language, not the words themselves, that inspires and strengthens her.

The idea of writing as an act of rebellion and grounds for subversive power exchange is profoundly explored in the novel, debatably extrapolating into arguments for the strengths of feminist poststructuralist theory. As Atwood comments:

I think most writers share this distrust of language...But language is one of the few tools we *do* have. So we have to use it. We even have to trust it, though it's untrustworthy (Atwood in Hancock, all in Ingersoll ed, 1992: 209).

Indeed, the concept of using language, despite its limitations, to register meaningful resistance to oppression is explored at great length in The Handmaid's Tale. In the training school, lip-reading each woman's name as they lay next to each other is the one power the training Handmaid's can lay claim to – the power to claim identity and pass a scrap of symbolic information on to others. On a larger scale, the entire account of the Handmaid's life in Gilead is presented as a clandestine recording, presumably completed when the Handmaid was both literally and figuratively escaping from the law of Gilead. Language, therefore, seems to open a possibility for rebellion, escape. Even the patriarchy appears to recognise the potential of language for women, with one member of the Sons of Jacob thinking tank retrospectively commenting "[o]ur big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again" (Atwood, 1996: 320).

Although language is a tool of the system and, therefore, carries with it the internal restrictions of regimented gendered possibilities, it can be manipulated to draw attention to its own artificiality. There is the potential for meanings to be disrupted, if not reformed:

Although Offred uses the oppressors' language, she uses it to her advantage and fits it to her needs...Offred learns to reconstruct stories and to plan for the future. For her, as for Scheherazade, the tale becomes a means of survival (Freibert in McCombs, 1993: 288).

In this regard, the self-aware narrator places a great deal of emphasis on word-play. Atwood examines the apparent randomness of words' meanings, grouping them in new ways which explore more sinister interpretations. Words, it would seem, are tools for manipulation, they are continually being used to create meaning, and yet are not neutral surfaces themselves:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others (Atwood, 1996: 120).

This style of self-conscious narration denaturalises language, with the narrator very often asking us to hear or feel words, instead of just thinking them. The use of italics places the word under even greater scrutiny, denaturalising it from the rest of the sentence. Musing on the fate of her husband, the Handmaid-narrator says:

I pray that at least one hole is neatly, quickly and finally through the skull, through the place where all the pictures were, so that there would have been only the one flash, of darkness or pain, dull I hope, like the word *thud* (Atwood, 1996: 114).

This is what I feel like: this sound of glass. I feel like the word *shatter* (Atwood, 1996: 113).

Through her non-standard use of language, she "not only registers her resistance to the official speech and volatilising discourse of the state, she also signifies her desperate desire to retain some sense of control" (Brooks Bouson, 1993: 149). Not only does the questioning of linguistic constructions that are taken for granted force a closer examination of the relationship between language, power and oppression, but it is also instrumental in providing comfort to the Handmaid. "These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself" (Atwood, 1996: 120), she states, with a telling pun on the word "compose." Hers, however, are highly subversive litanies, litanies that allow her to see through the matrix of social organisation that operates around her. It

is, in fact, just this small-scale questioning and interrogating of language that extends outwards throughout the text to finally encompass all systems of making meaning(s). Language is destabilised to draw attention to its artificiality and limitations, culminating in a deconstruction of what we come to realise is the purely linguistic category of women.

Notably, our Gileadean narrator occupies several subject positions, often concurrently, moving between many, seemingly restrictive, boundaries of Gileadean culture. She travels, for instance, between the Handmaid's prescribed domestic setting to prohibited places, such as Jezebels and Nick's room. Her relationship with the Commander, too, crosses the bounds of her defined role; in this manner she infringes both literally and figuratively on the territory of Serena Joy. Michael (1996: 153) suggests that by occupying "a multiplicity of officially incompatible positions," the narrator manages to destabilise the grand authorial discourse that threatens to define her and, in Butlerian terms, to subvert the authority of the law:

[b]y disrupting established boundaries and highlighting indeterminacy, Offred in effect subverts not only the Gileadean system but also western metaphysics in general, which is grounded in binary logic and set boundaries (Michael, 1996: 153).

Atwood deliberately denies us any stable sense of identity for the main narrating voice, whilst still maintaining the overall narrative drive. This achievement may answer the question so often posed by critics of poststructuralism: how does one represent without a stable subject? Offred's personal task, however, is ultimately to achieve precisely that – her own subjectivity. Indeed, Michael (1996: 137) has argued that, whilst Offred works hard to define herself as a subject in grounded terms that lie in opposition to her position as object of the Gilead system, the narrative itself functions to actively undermine that very process of attaining coherent subjectivity. The complex relationship of language with a sense of selfhood is, therefore, explored in detail. Both reader and narrator are engaged in interactions to achieve meaning, all of which are mediated by language that concurrently enables and restricts this process. As Foucault notes:

[D]iscourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an

opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1978: 101).

The question of (self)representation, therefore, becomes one of shifting perspectives and multiple truths, highlighting the naturalised constructions inherent within language.

Atwood's effort to undermine the naturalised role of language as simplistic provider of meaning extends to her female protagonist. Whilst the narrator tells Nick her real name, this knowledge is kept out of our own grasp. Some critics (Freibert in McCombs, 1988 and Domville, 2006) have suggested that her name is June, since it is the only name left unaccounted for in the whispered list given at the opening account of the school. This would have specific textual relevance, since it is also the name for the month immediately following May – symbolic for its connection with the liberation movement. However, the connection, whilst intriguing, remains conjecture, with no specific, un-encoded references made by Atwood. The name that the narrator *is* given, however, is a patronymic, indicating her Commander's literal possession of her – Of-Fred. Brooks Bousson (1993: 137-8) discusses both the patriarchally possessive signification of the name and the concurrent suggestions of words such as “afraid,” “offered” and “off-read” that it conjures. The process of textual involvement that these homonyms initiate make the reader complicit with Atwood's strategy of word play and promotion of multiple meaning. They also break the traditional boundaries of textual authority between author and reader, since meaning is not the sole vestige of the author, but is mutable according to the interpretations of the reader:

The reader of Atwood's novels can never be passive; he must accept responsibility for the world he too is bringing to life by his act of reading (Hutcheon in Grace and Weir, 1983: 29-30).

In denying the reader a linguistic identity label outside of the newly acquired patronymic by which to fix the narrator's identity, Atwood continually reminds us both of the limits of our own knowledge (thus ensuring the continuation of a self-conscious gulf between narrative and narrator), and the illusory politics of the concept of knowing at all. Michael agrees:

[T]he novel's failure to disclose that name indicates its criticism of forms of naming as means of fixing and oppressing human beings...Atwood challenges the traditional equation of fixed identity with subjectivity and presents a more fluid version of the subject. The [novel]...pushes toward a view of language as unstable, as both potentially oppressive and liberating (Michael, 1996: 154-5).

"My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech" (Atwood, 1996: 86), says the narrator, simultaneously drawing to our attention the artificiality of identity and of all linguistic (re)constructions. Displaying an awareness of the limitations of language and the constructions of identity and truth, she poses many challenges to the naturalised sense of linguistic reality:

As a narrator, she demonstrates a postmodern sensibility in her rejection of the dichotomy between reality and fiction, in her emphasis on the gaps in language, and in her investigation of the constructed quality of language (Michael, 1996: 157).

Michael (1996: 157) cites the Handmaid's three contradictory versions of what happened to her husband, Luke, and her child after their capture as an example of this linguistic destabilisation. Offred believes in all three of them simultaneously and, therefore, asserts that all three are true:

The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at once and at the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it. This is also a belief of mine. This also may be untrue (Atwood, 1996: 116).

The Handmaid's narrative self-correction draws attention to her own limitations and constructions in the weaving of the truth-story she produces:

In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction (Atwood, 1996: 150).

Atwood's insistence of the subjectivity of truth and construction of meanings in language at the narrative level, therefore, offers a strong poststructuralist message to the reader in the deconstruction of absolute linguistic meaning.

In the same vein, Davison (in VanSpanckeren and Castro, 1988: 115) questions “how much the very process of assembling a text...means *creating* a fiction.” As this extract from Atwood’s poetry demonstrates, the notion of authority and linguistic transparency is a theme which is extremely pertinent. As Atwood has written:

Don’t ask for the true story;
why do you need it?

It’s not what I set out with
or what I carry.

...

The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you
need it? Don’t ever

ask for the true story (‘True Stories’ lines 1-4; 28-32 in Atwood, 1987: 57-8).

Just as Offred breaks out of Gilead’s regulatory representational system, Atwood breaks the confines of conventional textual politics. Through refusing to adhere to conventional structural politics, she demonstrates a strategy to undermine oppressive representations of identity and meaning. The notion of the artificial simplicity of linguistic meaning is also explored meta-textually, specifically with the framing device of the final historical (and historicising) addendum. With the addition of these historical notes, we find the politics of production of the first text are, themselves, questioned. We come to realise that the narrative we have accepted unquestioningly has, in fact, come to us by means of several other steps (and hands) that were previously rendered invisible. Indeed, the academic admits to “arrang[ing] the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go” (Atwood, 1996: 314). Denied any stable sense of textual positioning, narrative identity or even truth, we are brought back to an understanding that it is impossible for language to communicate simply or without a mediating ideology.

In the final of a series of moves to deny the reader an answer to what may or may not be behind the Handmaid’s official mask of patriarchal oppression, she literally

disappears. All we have to guide us is language; and language, as we have seen, is inherently ideological and untrustworthy. The feminist frustration of being unable to get beyond language to some essential, true female self, is, therefore, perfectly enacted by this textual break. The narrator escapes (both the control of the system and that of the reader), only to be replaced by the male academic's analysis. This, itself, is the last of a long series of self-aware textual moments; after all, what environment other than academia is more suited to questioning the idea of knowing gender? "Atwood has, I think, made an important point," suggests Grace (in Nicholson, 1994: 198). "Endings are things that happen. Conclusions are things we make." The reader is, once again, made complicit in the construction of meaning.

Davidson (in VanSpanckeren and Castro, 1988: 114-5) notes that the academic authority which the Cambridge Don brings to the text functions to overshadow the Handmaid's own account. Grace suggests that his conclusions

confirm his own credentials rather than illuminating what we have just read. The *presence* of her voice is appropriated, then erased, by his... To be told that we know little about the woman called Offred and that 'many gaps remain' should jolt us into questioning the validity and authority of all those discourses that insist upon a single truth, a predetermined genre, a seamless narrative and conclusion (in Nicholson, 1994: 199).

Not only is Professor Pieixoto often blind to his own construction of the meaning of the text, but his rigid insistence on academic objectivity is plainly questionable:

These historical notes, like any scholarly afterward, also serve to validate the text that they follow. And there is something ominous in that claiming of the right to have the last word (Davidson in Van Spanckeren and Castro, 1988: 114).

This self-professed desire for objectivity and suspension of judgment is disconcerting, especially in the light of the objectification suffered by the Gileadean narrator, since it firmly repositions the Handmaid as object of the male gaze and knowledge.

Indeed, Professor Pieixoto's sexism has been noted at length (Michael, 1996: 165). His disparaging references to the "underground frailroad" (Atwood, 1996: 313), deliberately stressed sexual puns and male-authored point of reference in his pseudo-

Chaucerian choice of title for the taped narrative, function to both literally appropriate and de-legitimate the Handmaid's voice as well as those of women in general. His verbal punning on "char" and "chair," for instance (Atwood, 1996: 312), effectively subsumes the female chair to a "marginal place as mere handmaiden to Pieixoto's central text" (Davidson in VanSpanckeren and Castro, 1988: 119) As Davidson critiques:

The grotesque transformation of women's bodies into passive receptacles for the perpetuation of the genes of the Regime's Commanders is itself grotesquely transmogrified, in the twenty-second century, into silly sexist jests (ibid: 116).

The use of the term "historical notes" to head the symposium extract once again reminds the reader of the nature of historical truth and the bounds between fact and fiction (something the Handmaid, if not the Professor, is painfully aware of). The Handmaid demonstrates consciousness of how power-structures function to legitimate certain histories and marginalise others. This makes us think twice before agreeing with Professor Pieixoto's situating of the taped narrative against his own, rational interpretation. If history is, by definition, a narrative, we are encouraged to question whose account is given credence and why.

A poststructuralist reading of The Handmaid's Tale proves it to be a self-aware and -reflexive text. It, thereby, actively works to break the circuitous thinking of oppressive sexual binaries by exposing them and their functioning. Notably, Atwood also offers possibilities for challenge and rebellion, allowing for a profitable direction in feminist representational politics. As Grace notes:

The walls and fences which are set up to divide culture from nature, male from female, logic from intuition, and which facilitate domination and devaluation, must come down...Hence to read Atwood correctly is to understand her as breaking imprisoning circles, not as resolving (canceling or transcending) polarities altogether, not as transforming myth into reality or as reversing the power structures in the dichotomous system (Grace in Grace and Weir eds, 1983: 13)

Unlike Brown and Ensler, who often seek opportunities to assert female agency merely through reversing conventional binary thinking, Atwood's policy is to both reveal and de-naturalise such patterns for close critical scrutiny. Ensler and Brown

construct gendered identity whilst purporting only to describe it. Atwood, contrarily, focuses on simply describing the construction of gender. Highlighting others' focus on any normative gendered body, she reveals the limitations of such an approach. She further suggests ways in which such thinking can be exposed and, thus, challenged. The Handmaid's Tale, therefore, sets the standard for critical feminist representation by offering an example of an open, yet workable, gender discourse.

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CONCLUSION

Feminist representation of women has always been a fraught issue. As I have demonstrated, feminism has been through a time where, in the face of patriarchal oppression that based women's inferiority on their physical difference from men, it has needed to argue a distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender. This separation did much to forge a space for the legitimation of arguments for women's rights, as it diminished the centrality of the body to the issue of identity construction. This approach, though providing numerous successes for most women in many countries (enfranchisement being the most tangible), has ultimately become its own representational problem. In associating the acquired effects of culture solely with gendered identity, the concept of the female body unavoidably became regulative, singular and naturalised. As second wave feminists had already shown, fundamental differences in class, race and sexual orientation make a unilateral social identification of women impossible (hooks, 1981; hooks, 2000; Rich, 1978; Rich, 1980). The advent of poststructuralism demonstrated that the last bastion of feminism's coherent subject – the identifiable female body – was equally unsatisfactory as a common experience of womanhood. Theorists like Butler revealed that the rigid, physical boundedness of the body – often crucially positioned as a concept that polices entry into female identity – creates problems when bodies do not behave according to the binary male/female sex module that notions of natural sex both create and perpetuate. This radical deconstruction of any universal notion of womanhood has resulted in feminists experiencing great difficulty articulating a stable subject to represent and support without perpetuating the same tropes of exclusion and oppression to which feminism originally responded.

Texts that speak directly to such matters provide interesting analytic material, since they reveal ways of thinking and seeing gender. I have undertaken to demonstrate that, even when texts are designed specifically to address such issues of gender, oppression and identity, they can merely reinforce negative patterns of exclusion and regulation. In each text, I have attempted to tease out the, often highly political, reasons underlying the way the gendered body and its relation to identity are spoken

and thought about. I have further demonstrated that, too often, terms are used naïvely and without any critical engagement with the implications for their meaning(s). In this regard, I have analysed Ensler's The Vagina Monologues, Brown's The Da Vinci Code and Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, all three of which have been shown to have feminist sympathies. All three texts also attempt to highlight the aforementioned problems of gender representation that are inherent in feminist attempts to emancipate women from oppressive identity positions. I have analysed their respective efforts using Butler's notion of "the law" (Butler, 1999: 5), suggesting that each author has responded to its gendered imperatives in various ways, and with varying relative successes. In particular, I have traced both Ensler's and Brown's attempts to empower women by offering them certain subject positions that the authors erroneously figure as natural and pre-discursive.

I have uncovered extensive trends of reductive representation in both The Vagina Monologues and The Da Vinci Code. Both texts rely on normative, heterosexual and reproductive notions of the female body. Ostensibly merely (re)presenting these notions as natural, I demonstrate that, in actuality, they both construct and perpetuate them, relying on the existence of a perfect physical binary division between male and female terms. As Butler notes:

The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system (Butler, 1999: 30).

Both of these texts combine an overwhelmingly heterosexist bias with deeply problematic representations of physical difference, culminating in profoundly exclusionary politics of identity. After analysis, I conclude that The Vagina Monologues, ostensibly representing a heteroglossia of women's experiences, can be revealed to function more on the level of ventriloquism by Ensler than actual representivity. The play's marginalisation and silencing of non-normative female bodies is present at both a structural and a thematic level. Such voices are literally denied direct vocal representation, sidelined to transitional sections of the V-Day text that are, crucially, not included in performance. What *is* performed, however, is a

clearly crafted notion of gendered identity centred around the part (in this case, the vagina), with tacit yet faulty understandings both that the performance is a true reflection of gendered reality and that gendered reality itself is natural and pre-discursive. As Butler reminds us, however, “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1999: 33).

The Da Vinci Code is also heavily reliant on binary oppositions between the male and female terms, with the similar aim of naturalised, heterosexist identity bias. Even as Brown argues for this notion of the equal but opposite gendered binary to be the path to true feminist liberation, I reveal it to be a mere front for perpetuating long-standing notions of women’s subjugation. I demonstrate that the concept of the reductive gendered binary is a fundamental, underlying premise of the novel itself. An overwhelming array of recognisable Western historical and cultural entities, rituals and figures are paraded forth in the novel, intertwining to create a complex series of textual riddles. Ultimately, however, these reveal only one natural gendered identity as the true answer – the heterosexist, physically normative body. Indeed, such bodies are deified as the path to a state of divinely sanctioned balance, though always at the expense of those other bodies that do not fit with this approach. Such marginalised bodies are, in accordance with Brown’s paradigm, quite literally demonised. I have demonstrated this phenomenon with regards to Silas’s albinism, Teabing’s frailty and the condemned (homo)sexuality on sale in the Bois de Boulogne. Both Brown and Ensler resort to problematic synecdochal trends of representation. Whilst Ensler’s play lauds the vagina as the vital body part that stands for the woman’s whole, Brown eulogises the uterus. It is for these reasons that my readings of both The Vagina Monologues and The Da Vinci Code rest on the author’s inability to deliver the positive and empowering notions of womanhood that their works promise. Certainly, both authors are clearly unaware of the gendered politics they invoke by attempting to speak for womanhood, and this is central to their failure.

In opposition to such essentialist approaches, I have offered an analysis of The Handmaid’s Tale, stressing its value as a text that critically deconstructs notions of gender and identity. Butler, though emphasising the inability to get outside of the law, suggests that highlighting the construction of its discourse will assist in reducing the

power of its hegemony. This can be done “through the mobilization, subversive confusion and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place” (Butler, 1999: 44). Atwood, *I Have Demonstrated*, does precisely that. Only her approach, I argue, successfully articulates a notion of womanhood that is not repressive or regulatory.

I demonstrate at length that, though Atwood’s society of Gilead is both repressive and regulatory, this provides a convenient, though extreme, microcosm for texts such as *Brown’s* and *Ensler’s* which actively attempt to dictate and shape gender identity. I have, however, suggested that Atwood’s use of both language and narrative contextualisation function to disrupt any hegemonic notions of womanhood at both a textual and meta-textual level. I have argued that Atwood has presented a text that both critically interrogates notions of gender and offers new possibilities for rebellion. Though never offering the satisfaction of a final solution to the representational conundrum that is gender identity, she manages to highlight the cracks within the law’s discourse. She manages to both deny a stable narrative (at the level of both the novel and gendered identity itself) and maintain an overall coherence of meaning. Atwood accomplishes this by suggesting subversive tactics through which such cracks can be highlighted in order to rebel against oppressive notions of regulative identity.

Since easy answers to the question of feminist representation are not readily available, a critical awareness of gender politics is necessary. Even when the terms are used critically, however, there are slippages. Merely because meaning cannot be accounted for absolutely within our current representation system does not mean that no effort should be made. Equally clearly, marginalised identities, bodies and issues need to be recognised and addressed – a feminism that rests at succeeding for most is a feminism that fundamentally fails its own ideological foundations. There may be no simple solutions to the problem, but awareness and sensitivity must be exercised if we are to move towards a more equal and open system of representation. This can most successfully be articulated by highlighting (and thus denaturalising) the workings of “the law,” by strategically disrupting the gendered linguistic status quo, and, above all else, by actively working against uncritical use of the term woman.

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